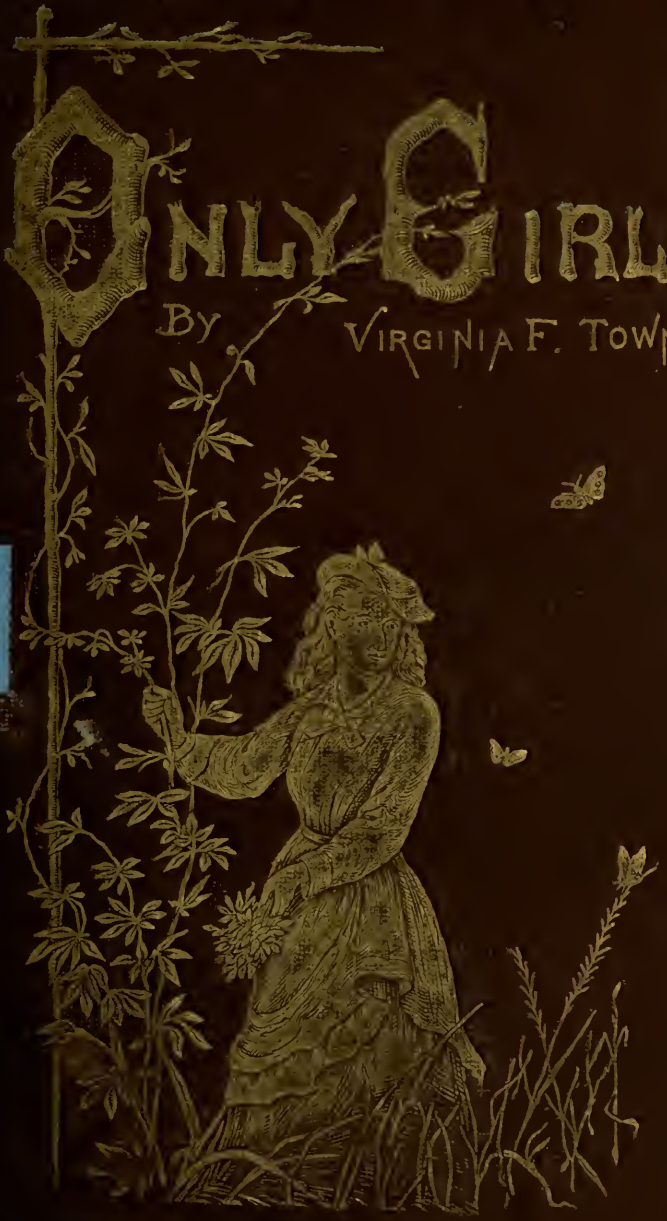
Only Girls

By Virginia F. Townsend



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ONLY GIRLS.

BY

VIRGINIA F. TOWNSEND.

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Meanwhile the Cardinal Ippolito, in whom all my best hopes were placed, being dead, I began to understand that the promises of this world are, for the most part, vain phantoms, and that to confide in one's self, and become something of worth and value is the best and safest course.

MICHAEL ANGELO.

ONLY GIRLS.

ONLY GIRLS.

CHAPTER I.

THE devil had entered into Keefe Bartlett's soul that day; and Keefe had not said, "Get thee behind me, Satan." On the contrary, he had provided wide room and hospitable entertainment; and the devil had not been slow to make himself at home in the inn which he found in Keefe's soul. For that matter, I suspect he never is, anywhere.

These facts certainly do not make a happy introduction for Keefe; yet, bad as they are, there is something to be said for him. He had just rounded the point of his seventeenth birthday, and what a world it had been to him! Such a hard, pinched, cruel face as it had turned towards him from the beginning! Yet it was the very same world which you and I know is

full of green fields, and laughter of golden daisies, and birds with bubbling sweetness of song, and, better than all, full of great, warm, soft hearts, and blessed helping hands, which make it God's dear, beautiful, happy world, despite the sin and the misery.

But the sin and the misery had fallen to Keefe's lot. Yet his history is not an uncommon one — more's the pity! If it were something quite out of the ordinary run of things, I should not think it worth writing to-day.

Keefe found himself stranded helpless upon the world before he had mounted his eighth birthday. His father, mate of a merchant vessel, with plenty of native shrewdness and ability, had undermined his constitution by frequent sprees when he was in foreign ports, and at last died in a drunken brawl in Buenos Ayres.

Keefe's mother, a small, worn, sallow-complexioned woman, took her husband's place at the family helm for a couple of years, which means, dropping all metaphor, went out to daily housecleaning, and kept herself and her son from starvation, and that was about all.

The work-woman took cold one day. Exposure and privation aggravated the disease, which at

first did not seem serious, and she went out of life in a swift consumption, and Keefe was left in the world with his eight birthdays, and his hungry little stomach, and his small fists, to fight his way into boyhood, without a solitary friend or a single dollar.

He did what he could. Biped or quadruped, the instinct of life is strong. He fought off that old, hungry, wolf of poverty, inch by inch, as shoe-black, horse-currier, news-boy, by turns; and so, with shoes out at the toes, and ragged coats, and a stomach whose normal condition seemed one of craving a good warm dinner, he managed somehow to keep soul and body together up to that day when the devil entered Keefe Bartlett.

Two days before, he, with a number of the hands, had been turned off from the Agawam Cotton Mills, a dull season rendering a reduction of the working-corps necessary.

Keefe had been employed at one of the looms about three months — on the whole the happiest of his life. He had steady employment and sufficient food; clean country air, too, which was something to one whose lungs had been half starved in the close, crowded atmosphere of city lanes and alleys.

Agawam was a small manufacturing town lying off the main arteries of railroads, with which it was connected by a branch line. It was a drowsy, picturesque old place, some two hundred miles from New York. Its large water-power had attracted some enterprising capitalists, and the old farming town had of late burgeoned into a flaming prosperity. Its mills gave work to hundreds of employees, and its quiet old farm-houses afforded shelter to swarms of city people, who alighted here every summer for the tonic of the air, and the great, still, restful greenery of woods and fields.

Some thirst and longing for these had got into Keefe Bartlett's blood that summer, chafing and stinging him night and day. The dark, sweltering, noisome alleys, the thud and roar of the great city, deafened and sickened him as it had never done before. He panted for breadth and freedom, as wild animals do shut up in iron-barred cages.

He rushed away from all these at last, a good deal as a wild animal might do. He had only his hands and feet, and whatever native pluck there was in him, and whatever shrewdness his education in the city purlieus had developed, to

clear a place for himself in the new world of the country.

Keefe had made his way to Agawam. When he left New York he had no goal in view, hardly any purpose beyond getting away from the hot alleys and the crowded streets. But he had followed the railroads, and slept under the trees at night, which was no hardship for one who had made his bed in the back yards of old warehouses and under piles of lumber, and dragged his chilled, stiffened limbs out in the morning, with the thermometer at zero. So at last, when his feet were blistered, and his pockets emptied of their last copper, he heard of the Agawam Cotton Mills, and of employment there for a few extra hands. It was only another day's pull for the tired, blistered feet, and Keefe reached Agawam, which opened into Arcadia for him when he found work in the cotton mills; and— You know the rest, until that day when, as I have told you, the devil came and found the door open, and whisked swiftly into the soul of Keefe Bartlett.

It happened in this wise: The morning after he had been turned off, he was hanging about the factories, partly from habit, partly from a cling-

ing fondness for the old place, when one of the partners came up to the office, which supplemented one side of the building near the corner where Keefe was standing idly, his hands in his pockets, and a dull, hopeless look on his heavy face, which did not improve it.

The partner, however, did not notice Keefe standing there, a little in the shadow around the corner. If he had, it would have made no difference: the boy would only have been one of "the hands" to the sharp, bustling, prosperous manufacturer — useful when he could be put to service; when he could not, to be turned off, like any worn out beast of burden: not a bad man, either — urbane, hospitable, jocose, in his own house.

"Only," taking, slowly, his Havana out of his mouth, while the smoke hung in little cloudy circles around the handsome iron-gray beard, "you cannot take religion and philanthropy into business — no, sir."

The head proprietor was not alone this morning. He was accompanied by his nephew, a slender, shapely youth, a junior, who had run down to Agawam for a few days, to sniff the mountain air, and boat, and ride horseback, and play croquet with his pretty cousin, Edith Folger,

who, falling behind him a birthday or two, had not yet surmounted the equatorial line of her teens.

This was the talk which Keefe Bartlett overheard that morning, standing in the shadow by the corner of the brick factory. It never once occurred to him that he was listening. If it had he would probably have seen nothing to be ashamed of in that act. His education had hardly been of the sort to make his moral susceptibilities very keen.

"Uncle Bryant, I want some money."

"I've no doubt of it, Rox" (this name being a happy elision of his mother's maiden one—Rochford). "It's a chronic want with young fellows like you," meanwhile fumbling in his pocket for the office key. "How much do you want now?"

"O, a couple of hundred will carry me over until I get back to town. You know I'm good for that amount."

"I hadn't thought of it in that light, Rox," with a pleasant laugh. "You shall have the money, of course. I'll get it for you as soon as the bank opens. Will that do?"

"Perfectly, thank you. Indeed, I shall have

no use for the money to-day, as I am off on a lark with Edith this morning."

"That foolish picnic business; yes, I remember. You shall have the money to-morrow. But what was all that talk at breakfast about your starting for the city? You'd better stay at least a fortnight longer."

"Thank you, sir. Nothing would delight me more. But I'm bound for a rough-and-tumble with some chums among the Adirondacks. I must set off to-morrow, rain or shine, to join my party."

"Sorry to hear it, Rox. We shall all miss you, especially Edith. Some aggravating business will take me away from home to-night; but I will bring over the money at dinner, and in case you are not there, leave it in my desk. You'll find it in an envelope addressed to you."

"Thank you again, uncle Bryant. I shall have no use for the money, as I said, until to-morrow afternoon, when I turn my back on this Arcadia of old Agawam; so, if you are to be absent, I may not see you again. Shall we say good by? I half hate the word. Good, round, flavorous old Saxon as it is, it leaves a little bitter tang in one's mouth, or thoughts."

"Don't say it, then, my boy. But I shall see

you again. The train doesn't leave until five o'clock. I expect to be home by that time."

"I meant to foot the first fifteen miles, though, and must set out early. I must get my limbs in training for the Adirondacks, you see."

The elder man laughed, and looked at his nephew, half amused, and yet with a touch of sadness, although Bryant Folger was not given to sentimentalizing over anything in the earth or the heavens above it.

"Ah, Rox," he said, "it's a capital thing to be a young fellow, with sound health, and plenty of money to spend, and not a care in the world. Youth flies, my boy, like Phaeton's steeds. You must make hay while the sun shines."

"I am doing my best at it, uncle Bryant," answered the young man. "Don't I expect a jolly old time at the Adirondacks, camping out, taking big hauls of trout, and bringing down heaps of birds, and a fat deer occasionally!"

"Well, good luck to you, Rox. Look out for your neck. Your talk almost stirs my old blood with a hankering for a gun and a powder-pouch, a fishing-line, and the wilderness."

"Cut business and civilization for once, and come along with us, uncle."

The elder man made a slight but significant gesture towards the mass of dull-red buildings which stared back at him with their long rows of windows, grim and remorseless as that old desert Sphinx we are forever hearing about. No words could have supplemented that gesture with any deeper meanings.

The most practical people are exquisitely dramatic once in a while, as was, for one instant, the head partner of the Agawam cotton works.

"Good by, and good luck to you, Rox."

The two men shook hands, the elder turning into his office, the younger going down the road, humming some notes of a German air he had heard at the last opera, with a crispness and sparkle all through them, like the drops of dew not yet dried from the wilted grass by the roadside.

All this time the figure in the corner by the office — a small stone addition which had been recently added to the main building — had not stirred. It had overheard every word of the conversation which had just transpired. It came out now and looked after the youth, going up the road with his careless, jaunty air, and easy half-dominant grace in every movement, like that

of one quite assured of his place in the world, and who felt that the best things in it — the cake and the wine — were his birthright share. The coarser part of the feast — the bread and the cold meat — might fall to other lots and welcome.

Look at Keefe Bartlett as he stands there, staring at that slender, graceful figure going up the road. He is not of that mould himself, being heavily built, with a slouch in his shoulders, and coarse, large hands, square, big features, with a tanned, pimply skin, lightish, bristly hair, the shade of leaves that have bleached all winter under the snows; thick light eyebrows, too, and eyes that have a shrewd gleam in them: once get a fair look there, you set a different value afterwards on the dull, heavy features.

The "turned-off hand" wears a suit of gray, coarse clothes — the best he ever had in his life. He has earned them since he came to Agawam. Since he came here, too, a great many strange thoughts have been working under the bristly hair. Keefe has listened to the questions astir in his brain, and all the steady whir and thud of the factory wheels could not drown them. He wonders what these differences in human lots mean; why all the hunger, and cold, and want,

the starved, miserable childhood, should have fallen to him, and the life, warmed, and spiced, and fragrant with love, and comfort, and luxury, to others.

He has brooded over it by night and by day. A bitter sense of wrong and outrage has taken possession of him more and more. He has a feeling of bitterness towards all rich men, as though they had robbed him of his birthright, and gloats sometimes over the thought that a day of reckoning is to come, he cannot tell when or how; but it is to be a day of triumph for labor and poverty, when the rich shall no longer grind the poor under their iron heel.

Keefe talks over this matter more or less with the workmen, when they hang, in the hot summer evenings, about the piazza of the big factory boarding-house down in the hollow. Not a very attractive place, certainly, but a palace in comparison with Keefe's former homes.

The boy is rather a favorite with the hands. He has a knack at acting, and entertains his companions with comic shows of scenes he has witnessed in the alleys and by-streets of that great Babel, two hundred miles south of Agawam —scenes not delicate or refined, perhaps, but

touched all through with some strong, native, human life.

Keefe is always sure of an audience that would have made a study for Hogarth — an audience with clay pipes, and loud guffaws, and admiring oaths, when he transforms himself into some street brawler, or shoe-black, or drunken sailor.

One of the workmen has assured the boy his vocation was the clown of a circus, and another has recommended the Bowery Theatre; after a while he "might make a big thing at the comic parts."

But Keefe had made no plans for the future when he was turned off from the place where, to his credit, considering his previous vagabond life and habits, he had worked steadily all summer. He had not money to pay his board for another week, and the winter was coming; and the outlook was gloomy enough.

Keefe thrust his hands into his pockets, and strode away from the factory office that morning with the talk which he had overheard at work in his brain, and his thoughts swelling in a great bitterness against the speakers, especially against the young man, just about his own age, who had

wealth, and pleasure, and friends at command; who had only to ask for a couple of hundred dollars, and lo! it was rained down upon him much as the clouds rained down their showers upon the thirsty grass.

And here was Keefe, without a dollar in the world, and with the old freezing and starvation he knew so well waiting for him a little way off! And to-morrow, with his two hundred dollars stowed away in his pocket, and his careless, jaunty air, which seemed an insulting defiance to Keefe, this youth would start all alone to walk over the road to the station at Plum Forks, the road by which Keefe had come to Agawam, and which he knew so well. And while his thoughts kept revolving around this central fact, all of a sudden, and so slyly that he did not know it, the devil entered into the soul of Keefe Bartlett.

A mood half fierce, half sullen, possessed him now. "What right had that 'Rox,'" Keefe kept asking himself, "to this two hundred dollars, which he was going to squander in gay carousals, with companions as lazy and lucky as himself, among the mountains? Those delicate fingers of his had never earned a dinner or a night's lodging;" and then Keefe drew his

hard, big hands out of his pockets, and stared at them with a smile fierce and bitter enough.

The boy wandered off by himself. His black thoughts were company enough for that day; and all the while he kept seeing, as in a vision, the slender figure moving rapidly along the track, with its careless, jaunty air. That would all be to-morrow. Keefe had taken in and remembered all the points of the journey. Rox would have to start about one o'clock in order to reach the down train in time. There were long lonely stretches on the road. Keefe knew them; he knew, too, that he had twice the muscular power of the delicately-bred student, for his vagrant life had toughened his naturally hardy constitution.

Keefe was not without weapons, too; he remembered now the pistol he had bought, for a mere song, of one of the workmen, in order to shoot muskrats. Not that he meant to use that, — a cold sweat actually started all over him, — of course not; but, then, how easy it would be, for any one who knew what Keefe did, to follow the young student, and come upon him suddenly from behind, in some lonely place on that long stretch of road, deal the fellow a blow that would knock sense and sight out of him for a few

minutes, and then rob him of that two hundred dollars, to which he had no right!

You may be sure, when such thoughts as these stirred in Keefe's soul, the devil was not far behind them. Keefe had had a conscience, not a very sensitive one, of course, with his education of old wharves and back alleys; still, he had always had the name of keeping his word among his brother boot-blacks and news-boys—some memory of the pinched, sallow-faced little woman, who had gone to her grave so many years before, holding him back from committing any act which the world agrees to call crime, even when the temptation had been very sharp.

Even to-day he thought of her sometimes; but he was hunted, maddened by disappointment, misery, and a burning sense of wrong; and all day long he kept brooding over the solitary, rapid young figure, on the lonely road, and seeing the two hundred dollars stowed away in his wallet. An evil glitter came into the boy's eyes, and it grew and grew there, until the whole face beneath seemed to grow heavy and brutal.

Keefe gloated over that money; his very blood hankered and tingled for it; and at last, after wandering that whole day among the highways

and over the country roads, when the sun shot up one wide purple splendor over the distant hills around Agawam, Keefe set his big jaws together, and, with an awful look darkling all over his face, swore that he would have the two hundred dollars.

And the devil, sitting in Keefe's soul, laughed to himself!

CHAPTER II.

"WHY, Rox, you are the most unaccountable being! How in the world did you contrive to drop down here in this fashion?"

She came in from the garden, where she had been gathering flowers — honeysuckle, pinks, jessamine, and sweet, fresh, dainty things of that sort, and found him stretched upon one of the lounges in the sitting-room in his usual careless fashion, only, whatever attitude Rox Coventry took, it was never awkward or angular.

Rox was Edith Folger's own cousin, and she adored him. He stood to her in the place of the brother who had died just within the borderland of her memory, while the remoter relation gave just a relishing spice of romance to their feeling for each other.

To say that Edith was a fairer flower than any of those fragrant, blossoming things she brought

in with her, would be as true as commonplace. She had a wonderfully sweet face, with big, dusky blue eyes, and glossy hair, with a flicker in it like bright live things, and a little tremulous flush in her cheeks; and her smile — well, of all the sweet things about Edith Folger, I think that smile was the sweetest.

As for the rest, she was an only child, her father's pet and darling, especially since her mother died.

"Perhaps I dropped down from the clouds, perhaps I came in on some dainty Ariel's back. Don't you know by this time I am not made of common clay, and can navigate earth or air in ways quite unknown to ordinary mortals?"

Edith's laugh slipped out, a fresh, silvery thing enough.

"I am ready to believe almost anything about you, Rox; but that mouthful is too huge; I cannot swallow it."

"Well, you needn't. I walked in like any other human biped, after a splendid swim, to ask for some lunch, and to tell you I must be off in half an hour."

"Half an hour!" tossing her flowers on the table with so hurried a movement that some

of them were scattered on the carpet. "O, Rox, I hoped you had given up that frantic notion of walking over to Plum Point Station."

"Frantic! Why, child, it is a most sensible and practical conclusion on my part. I need a little breathing for the Adirondacks, you know. Now, be the angel you always are, and order my lunch at once, and help me eat it, for I must devour it and really be off in half an hour."

"There is nothing to be done, then, but to let you have your own way, I suppose." And she went and touched the bell a little gravely. "What will you have?"

"O, a leg of cold chicken, some sandwiches, and to top off with, a glass of fresh cream and some berries."

It was evident that Rox was quite at home at his uncle Bryant's.

There was some more light, prankish talk between the two, with little silvery laughters of Edith's between, and an occasional burst from Rox, and then the servant who had received the girl's order brought in the lunch, and two had it in a pretty little alcove on one side of the big room.

"This is just delectable, Edith," exclaimed

Rox, as he piled the girl's plate with raspberries which had not yet lost the fresh coolness of morning dews, in which they had hung two hours before. "I pity the poor fellows who haven't cousins to eat lunches with them."

Edith would usually have been awake to the flavor of compliment in this remark. She had her little vanities, and liked to be praised, as all girls do; but she only smiled faintly as she took her saucer of berries, and actually looked grave for a moment before she said, —

"There are so many people in the world who are to be pitied, Rox!"

"I've no doubt of it," helping himself to the cold chicken with a crowned contentedness, such as one could fancy the gods might feel at some banquet, talking over the troubles of mortals.

Perhaps Edith thought something of this kind as she watched her cousin — for she had thoughts behind that pretty face of hers. In a minute Rox looked up from his plate. It was evident that no speculations on human affairs disturbed the appetite which he had brought in from his swim that morning.

"What kind of people were you thinking of, Edith?"

"All sorts of folks who are in trouble, and can't see their way out of it."

"They're a pretty huge lump, Edith," exclaimed Rox, cheerfully. Don't think, now, he was hard and selfish; he was only careless and thoughtless; but he had a real soft place in his heart, if one could get down to it. "What's put them into your head now?"

"I don't know, unless it was something which happened while I was gathering the flowers, just before you came in."

"Come, let's have it, Edith."

"It was very curious. I was way off in the corner by the hedge, hunting for some feathery greens to finish up my flowers, when all of a sudden — I really can't tell whether I saw him first — I knew somebody was watching me outside. There he was, when I turned round and looked, sitting on the grass, a big, broad-shouldered fellow, in a coarse gray suit, and a square, coarse, homely face under a bit of a skull-cap. He was looking at me with a steady, curious gaze, out of such strange eyes! I can't tell what the look meant; but there was some pain or mystery in it. There he sat, staring at me, like some old roughly-hewn statue"

"He'd no business there," exclaimed Rox, with a slight growl.

"Perhaps not. He turned his eyes away when ours met; and yet, when I looked again, there the figure sat, watching me with the indescribable look. It gave me a curious feeling; and I was turning to go away, when my curiosity got the better of me, and I just determined the fellow should speak to me; so I faced right about, and asked what came into my mind first.

"'Are you in want of anybody or anything?'"

"Bravo, Edith! That was like you," broke in Rox.

"He seemed startled and confused at first.

"'No; I don't wan't anything,' he answered, in a hurried way.

"I turned to go. I can't tell what made me stop and ask the next question; but I did."

"'Is there anything in the world you want? anything I can do for you?'

"He stared at me a moment before he spoke.

"'I should like twenty-five dollars,' he said."

"Well, that was cool," broke in Rox again, who by this time was a good deal interested in Edith's story.

"I thought so. If he had asked me for a

dollar, or even two of them, I would have got it for him; but twenty-five was, of course, not to be thought of. It struck me all of a sudden that the fellow might be crazy. I should have run off then, for certain, if the hedge had not been between us. I told him I could not give him anything like that; and then, feeling that he might possibly be hungry, I added, —

"'But I will bring you something to eat.'

"If you had seen the bitter, angry smile that came into his face!

"'I ain't a beggar,' he said, roughly; 'I don't want any of your cold pieces!'"

"The brute!" exclaimed Rox. "I dare say he was prowling round for a chance to help himself."

"I don't think a real beggar would have acted like that," answered Edith. "At any rate, I told him I had not supposed he was one, and that he must excuse me."

"You did?" said Rox, with an amused smile.

"Yes; for I was afraid I had hurt his feelings. His whole face lightened and changed after that.

"'You must excuse me, too,' he said, a good deal like a gentleman. 'I didn't expect you

would give me the money. The words came out themselves; and he turned at that and went off.

"Wasn't it all very curious, Rox?"

"Hugely so. Fellow either crack-brained or a rogue. Bet you my new gold watch on that."

"I cannot feel that he was either," answered Edith, with a little grave shake of her glossy head. "Something, Rox, I can't tell what, makes me feel that twenty-five dollars was really a matter of life and death to that boy; that he wanted it, as you and I have sometimes in our lives wanted something, and for which we would have given all the rest of the world."

"Ah, Edith, all that comes of your being such a sensitive, soft-hearted little puss. When you get to be as old as I am," — here Rox bridled a little, and wiped his budding mustache with an air, — "you will learn that it doesn't do to trust too far to one's impressions."

"Perhaps," said Edith, rather meekly and rather sceptically. "But, Rox, you did not see what I did — the look in that boy's eyes. It meant some dreadful trouble."

Perhaps Rox was slightly impressed by Edith's story. However, he shook the feeling off easily,

as ducks do water, and good-naturedly set himself to work to brighten up Edith.

"Whatever it was, you and I are not responsible, and it will do no good to bother your sensitive little soul over it."

By this time the lunch was finished. They had both left the table, and the girl was looking out of the window, while Rox, restless as usual, had taken to long strides up and down the room.

"It puzzles me," said Edith, half to herself.

"What?" asked Rox, coming over to her side.

"Why God hasn't made things better than they are."

He smiled a little at that. Her words always went, sabre-like, with clean, smooth stroke, to the core of a thing.

"Philosophers and theologians have been asking that question ever since the world was made. It's a great boggle, dear. Don't fret over it."

"But how can one help doing it, Rox? All the plums and the cake falling to our share, and such dry crumbs to the others — the bigger half, too."

"I know it. Sorry for 'em, poor souls. But

I'm not Atlas: I don't carry the world on my shoulders."

"It seems as though God must love us better than he does them. But, as he is God, he cannot do that, Rox."

"You are right there, Edith. I shouldn't like to believe the seeming was true of him, even though the love was on our side. But you forget that the difference is not mostly his making. It is the fault of the people themselves."

"There is a great deal in that, I know, Rox. Yet so many of these people have not had a chance!"

"Somebody's fault too, may be, in the long run. Things sometimes take generations to work themselves out. But, Edith, if you go on shooting those hard bullets of theology at me, I shall never reach Plum Point Station. I must be off straightway. Clear up your face and bid me a good by that I shall carry over the fifteen miles of road."

"O, Rox, what a big goose you are making of yourself to take this awful tramp! But, as you will do it, good by, and God speed."

She gave him both her hands. He took the soft, white things a moment, and kissed the fair

cheek with brotherly, cousinly freedom. She stood in the front door and watched him go his way through the dark larches and cedars, until at last he reached the gate, and turning there, lifted his hat to her, and went his way.

Somebody else watched him, too. It was the boy whom Edith had seen that morning sitting by the hedge, and who had haunted her ever since.

At some distance from the girl's residence was a small hillock, crowned with half a dozen old, wide-spreading, knarled apple trees. Under their shadow the boy had been crouched for the last hour, watching the road, of which his position commanded a view. From his hiding-place the boy saw the light, alert figure going down to the track. A few minutes afterwards he, too, crept out and followed Rox Coventry.

About three miles from Agawam the track ran for some distance through a kind of hollow formed by low, wooded hills on either side. There was no more lonely place than this on the whole road, which, twelve miles below, joined the main track at Plum Point Station.

It was about three o'clock as Rox Coventry reached the hollow. He remembered the time

afterwards, because he happened to take out his watch and look at it. The place, as I said, was lonely enough; a narrow, tunnel-like perspective between the hills; not a house in sight.

Rox was no coward. He had walked the three miles briskly; had been humming college tunes and making all sorts of plans for the grand "lark" among the Adirondacks; and sometimes his last talk with his cousin Edith had pushed in among the other things, and made a little grave background to them. The afternoon was soft and still, one of those when the year seems to hold her breath, and turn her head to listen, as though she caught some hint of frosts and change that were coming. Soft, low clouds hung all over the sky, of a clear pearly-gray; a hum of insects everywhere, and dreamings of winds among the leaves.

Suddenly Rox Coventry heard steps close behind him. He had always had remarkably keen ears. It flashed across him then, for the first time, that the road was lonely, and that he had brought no weapons with him. He turned suddenly, and encountered a figure only a few feet from him, and evidently approaching stealthily; a figure in gray, slouching, heavily-built,

with a square, heavy face, too, the jaws set grim and hard, the expression just now dark and evil enough; but of this last Rox did not get the full force, for, as he turned sharply about, a startled, guilty look broke up every other in the boy's face.

Rox's glance going over the figure recognized it at once as identical with Edith's description. Had not this been the case, there was something so suspicious in the stranger's whole appearance at that moment that it must have struck Rox.

But it never once occurred to him that this stealthy approach and this singular attitude must mean something sinister. He never even suspected that the stranger had been silently following him all the way from Agawam. He only thought it was a curious kind of chance which had brought him face to face with Edith's description.

The two stood in the road, the soft, yellowish lights from the clouds upon them, the dark hollow stretching beyond. The contrast between the two was worthy an artist — that big, slouching, rather overgrown figure, and the slender, well-shaped student, instinct with a certain grace, even

in repose: the difference that between a dray-horse and some high-bred courser.

The two stood a moment looking at each other. They had been brought up in the same city, perhaps not three miles apart; they had watched the same shapes of clouds, the same stars, played in the same snows, and stammered the same vernacular in their childhood. And yet, what a different world it had been to those two!

Then Rox called out, in his cheerful, ringing voice, —

"Is there anything you want to say to me?"

Still that surprised, half-guilty look in the boy's eyes. "Was he insane, after all?" remembering his impression on hearing Edith's story, and feeling a little uneasy.

"No, I don't want anything," answered the boy, rather suddenly.

Rox hesitated a moment; then he remembered that he had no time to spare, and plunged off into the hollow.

The boy stood still, staring after the lithe figure going up the road. His hand was in his pocket, and the big, cold fingers were fumbling about a pistol there. His face was livid under the tan and pimples.

Keefe Bartlett — there is no need I should tell you it was he — had come all this way to find Rox Coventry. He could not give up his purpose now; and yet, for a moment after the stranger's kindly question, which still seemed to linger among the soft humming of the purple bees in the grasses, Keefe was more than half a mind to send the pistol off at his own temples, Then the old evil look came into his face again.

"I won't turn poltroon now," he muttered, with an oath. "I came out here for that fellow's money; and I'll have it, or die;" and he started up the road.

Rox, moving rapidly along, was having his thoughts, with no little sparkling interludes of college airs this time.

"What if it was all true, that which Edith had said, and the twenty-five dollars was a matter of life and death to this boy? Curious, how he had turned up in the road at this juncture!"

Rox thought of the pile of notes stuffed away in his vest pocket.

"It would be an easy thing to take out twenty-five dollars, and go back and put it into the boy's hands. What if he should make a fool of him-

self, and do it now? for, of course, none but a fool would do so absurd a thing! Yet, if Rox were as certain about the matter as his pretty cousin seemed to be, he would try the experiment.

"Suppose he should do it now? Of course it would be an awful sell; but then Rox would hardly feel it. There was just time to go back and do the thing, and it was only a little rather expensive fun, after all, and nobody's business but his own."

These thoughts and a good many more like them went swiftly through the mind of Rox Coventry, underneath all, that soft place which Edith's talk had touched that morning. Rox was half ashamed of it, tried to invest the whole thing with an air of cool fun. But of a sudden the youth whirled about.

There, close behind him, with his swift, stealthy pace, was the boy again. But Rox was too intent on his errand to be startled a second time. The two were almost in the heart of the hollow, the wooded hills rising darkly on either side, and overhead the gray, smoky-looking clouds.

Rox walked straight up to the boy, whose

face, just now, hardly improved on acquaintance.

"Are you the boy who told a young girl at Agawam this morning that you wanted twenty-five dollars?"

The big face was a blank of surprise for a moment or two. The fierce, evil look with which he was approaching his intended victim wholly disappeared.

"Yes," in a husky, half-frightened voice; but his eyes held to his questioner's; "I said that to her."

"I should like to know — I've a reason for asking — what do you intend to do with this money, if you could get it."

A smile, dark and bitter enough, struggled over the big mouth.

"I don't think it would take long to tell; but — I ain't a beggar," with a sudden fierceness.

"No; I did not take you for one; but," with a frank cordiality of manner which made Rox Coventry the favorite he was with everybody, "I wish you would tell me just how much money you have in the world. Don't think I am rude, and, if it does not please you, don't do it."

Something in the frank, pleasant manner half compelled Keefe Bartlett against his will. He put his hand into his pocket, — he had dropped something in the grass a moment before, — and drew out twenty cents. With some vague sense of conscience which haunted the poor, tempted soul, the boy had settled with his landlady before he started out on his errand of crime.

"Is that all?" exclaimed Rox, touched and shocked.

"That is all."

"And you have no way to get any more?"

"No."

"Poor fellow! Been at work at the cotton-mills?"

"Yes."

"Well, you shall have the twenty-five dollars. But, mind, I don't think you are a beggar," giving the turned-off hand a friendly little slap on the shoulder; and then, taking out his wallet, Rox counted over the money, — a couple of tens and a five, — and put it in Keefe's hand. "There!" he said; "much good may it do you. Haven't time for another word. Good by." And with the instinctive grace which is apt to follow a good action, Rox

lifted his hat to the mill hand, and hurried off down the road again, leaving Keefe standing in the hollow, with the purple bees humming in the grasses, and the great, smoke-tinged clouds overhead; and over all these, I like to think, the glad faces of God's angels on the watch.

CHAPTER III.

ROX COVENTRY, going at a brisk pace, felt a hand suddenly on his shoulder. He was, perhaps, half a mile from the spot where the singular interview had taken place between himself and Keefe Bartlett. He did turn around now with a start, and something much like a shudder, and confronted the youth again.

This time Keefe's face was white — the pallor striking through the tan and freckles, while the eyes had a bright, scared stare, as they met Rox Coventry's.

"Was — Did you hear anything telling you to give me that money?" Keefe panted out in a hurried, frightened way.

"No. I shall take all the credit of that act to myself. No doubt there is many a one I should be glad to slip off on other shoulders, although mine are tolerably broad," shaking them in his comical fashion.

"You are sure you didn't hear anything speaking to you out of the sky, or woods, or round?" inquired Keefe, in a voice hardly above his breath.

Rox caught the meaning in a moment. It might be some old ghostly ballad of the streets, or it might be the superstitious element which lurks somewhere in all human souls, was at work in this boy's brain. Rox was touched a little, and a good deal amused.

"No, there wasn't a whisper of a ghost around, nor so much as the tip end of an angel's feather in sight. What put that absurd notion into your head, my dear fellow?"

"But what *made* you give me that money, then?" persisted Keefe, in the strangest kind of voice. I know of no word which precisely describes it, only you felt it was a life-and-death matter to him.

"On my honor, I can't tell you," said Rox, running his fingers through his hair. "Everybody has his soft streaks, you know. Perhaps this was one of mine. Come, don't stare at me like that. Take the money and have a jolly time with it."

Then, remembering there was not another

breath to lose, Rox wheeled about, without a word more, and set off rapidly for Plum Point Station.

Keefe stood in the road and watched him until the swift, lithe figure was quite out of sight. The young workman made a picture himself, — not a handsome one, certainly, but striking of its own kind, — with his lips apart, and his hands fumbling at each other, and his big, strongly-knit frame standing there in the hot road, like some coarsely-hewn statue.

Then he wheeled about suddenly, wiping off with his coat sleeve some thick drops of perspiration which had gathered among the moles and freckles; and then — it was very curious — he turned and went back to the very spot where Rox, ten minutes before, had given him the money, and which he still held tightly clasped in his hand.

He sank down in the warm sand close by the track; he spread the notes out on his knee, carefully smoothing the edges, and counting them over one by one, with eyes that had a strange, bright glitter in them; then he looked up suddenly into the great, drab masses of clouds overhead.

"O God," he cried out sharply, "if You are up there, look down and see that — You know I meant to kill him, and that it saved me, and saved him, too — the kind, generous fellow — "

Keefe broke right off, something that was like a howl ending in a great, gulping sob. He laid his square face in his big hands, flopped right over, with about as much grace as a polar-bear, stretched himself at full length on the ground, while a great tempest of tears and sobs shook him from head to foot.

He lay there for a full half hour, wallowing in the warm sand, while that salt rain poured down his cheeks; and some hardness, and pain, and bitterness were wept out of Keefe Bartlett's heart at that time which never got back to it again.

He might live to be a gray, sodden-faced old man, but he would never forget that hour until the grave shut it away from him in soft, dark silence, and perhaps not then.

At last Keefe rose up, wiping his red, swollen eyes with his cotton handkerchief, staring all around him, as though it was a new world he gazed on, or as though he had been suddenly caught up and landed in some corner of the moon.

Then Keefe's eyes caught a bright glitter of something lying amongst a fringe of weeds close to the track. He shuddered and drew his breath hard, as though he had caught sight of the scales of some deadly serpent lying in wait there. The next moment he sprang to his feet, snapped his grim jaws together, and snatched up the pistol which lay there amongst the weeds, and with which he had meant to —

Keefe's thoughts turned away from the black conclusion, and so my pen shall.

It was a full half mile to the river. Keefe went all the way on a swift run, and when he reached the bank he tossed the pistol into the waters, and a smile of unutterable relief and triumph came into his face as he saw them close over it and bury the thing from his sight.

He did not return to the track afterwards. He took the river road now, which wound through the broad, low pastures, and past old mills, and through belts of woodlands.

What a changed world it was to this Keefe Bartlett, late from the city slums and the factory looms! How new, and fair, and sweet all nature smiled on him. It seemed as though she understood all about it, and was glad for him!

He did not feel any longer solitary and shut out from all the beauty and gladness, but as though he had his place and share in it. He heard the twitter of the robins, the happy gurgle of winds among the leaves, as though they broke up and died away in dreams, the hum of insects in the grass, and sometimes the sun almost came out of the clouds overhead to look at him, holding only the thinnest yellow gauze of vapor before her face, and then slipping behind the soft gray masses of cloud.

All these things Keefe observed curiously; all made him strangely happy. The heart within him seemed changed to a child's heart. Sometimes he turned somersaults, sometimes he leaped over stone walls, or lay down on the grass, or, springing up, ran and shouted until he was out of breath, and was like a child let loose on its first holiday. But for the most part Keefe was quiet. There was a great, still gladness at his heart, and the tears kept swelling in his eyes, and he would wipe them away with his coat sleeve.

Every little while, too, he would thrust his hand in his pocket, and feel the small roll there, which meant so much more than money to him.

Keefe was just as much alone in the world as ever; the future was precisely the same dark, looming future which it had always been to Keefe Bartlett; but a new faith and trust had entered into him. He was not troubled or afraid any more. The love which had taken the leaves, and birds, and the great world into its strong, tender care, had taken him also. He felt it all around him. In the blackest moment of his life it had reached out suddenly and snatched him out of the very grasp of the devil.

And sometimes the pinched, sallow face of his mother rose up before him, and he wondered if she knew and was glad for her boy.

So Keefe wandered along hour after hour, until the afternoon was nearly gone. He had no object in view, no aim of any sort that he was conscious of. He had money to pay for his night's lodging at some country tavern; or, if the worst came, he could throw himself down in the shelter of some big, motherly tree, and drop into a sleep which many a pampered rich man might envy.

At last he came where the road forked. He took the right one, went a few rods, and then, without any reason that he was conscious of, suddenly faced about and took the left road. It

passed pleasant, old-fashioned farm-houses occasionally, the smoke curling in blue, vaporous-looking clouds above the wide-mouthed chimneys, and hollyhocks and dahlias abloom in the front yards.

Poor Keefe! With that twenty-five dollars stowed away in his pocket, he was richer than he had ever been in all his life before; and he had a feeling that the world belonged to him, which is, perhaps, very much pleasanter than the real ownership would prove.

He was moving up a long, sloping stretch of hill, with cornfields on either side, when, all of a sudden, Keefe stood still. He had heard a cry, not loud, but there was some sound in it of human pain and fright.

In a moment he heard the cry again, this time a little louder, and he sprang over the bars and hurried through the cornfields in the direction of the sound.

An old, broken stone-wall divided the cornfield from a lane, whence the cries proceeded, growing louder and shriller with terror as Keefe approached them. It was the cry of a girl, he was certain of that, as he plunged through the grassy lane and under the deep shadows of the

scraggy wild-cherry trees, which had evidently taken root and flourished on their own responsibility.

At the point where the lane broadened stood a deserted old farm-house. It was a desolate place enough, as, at the best, all country houses are, left to mice and spiders, and given up to the carnival of winds and rains. The blackened roof had fallen in more or less; the doors had been carried away, and the wooden blinds creaked and flapped in the winds which roamed, in a pitying mood, about the lonely premises, and made the rafters and timbers quiver, as though with old, plaintive memories of the human life they had once sheltered and cherished.

The shrill cries, convulsed with pain or fright, were close at hand now. Keefe made a dive around to the back of the house, his ears keen and strained as a blood-hound's. There was an old well here, and a mouldy worm-eaten curb on one side. A pair of meagre brown hands clutched frantically at the boards, and a bit of glossy brown hair showed just above them.

Keefe took in the whole with one glance. In a flash he was at the side of the well. It was an awful sight. There the little girl hung by those

brown sticks of arms, and twenty feet below, the black, still circle of water waited to take her down into its cold heart. It could not have many moments longer to wait. The child's strength was almost exhausted by this time. Every instant threatened to be her last. She clung to the curb with the energy of despair. It was wonderful that her strength had not failed before.

"There, hold on!" shouted Keefe, as a louder shriek than ever smote the still air. "Don't you see I'm here? And I've come to save you."

The girl looked up as well as she could. Keefe saw a small, thin, freckled face, with a pair of big dark eyes, fiercely bright now with their agony of terror.

Had a voice from heaven spoken to the girl it could not have sounded sweeter than Keefe's loud, coarse tones, with the pity and the help all through them; and the square, heavy face, with the world of sympathy in the light deep-set eyes which leaned over the well, looked more beautiful to the child at that moment than any face she had ever seen in her life.

There was a quick, gasping sob. In the sudden

revulsion of feeling, she came very near losing her hold. The small, frightened creature could not utter one word.

It required steady nerves and swift hands now. Keefe had both. He got down on his knees, leaned his big, shambling body far over the shaking well-curb, which threatened to break every moment with the child's weight, light as that was. It was all the work of an instant. He put his hands under the girl's arms, and grasped them with all his firm strength.

"Now, let go the boards, and put your arms tight around my neck. Don't be frightened. I'll have you out of this fix before you know it."

The voice, full of kindly, helpful courage, sent its own confidence to the fluttering heart. With a last shudder of fright and hope, the girl withdrew one arm and grasped the young man's neck, then the other closed around him, and the warm, meagre arms clung to him as the dying cling to their deliverer.

The rest was easily done. Keefe lifted the little figure, with all possible care, over the well-curb, and set it down on the grass among the sweet-smelling mint.

But the strain had been too great. With a little

moaning gasp, the child's head fell back on the ground. She had fainted quite away. Keefe was terribly frightened for a moment, the white, set lips looked so much like the dead. But his fears took at once the form of practical help. He twisted a big mullein leaf into a cup, and filled this with cool water from a little stream among the weeds, and swabbed the child's forehead in the kindest, clumsiest way.

When the water trickled down between her lips, she opened her eyes, and saw the face bending over her which had leaned over the well in that moment of awful agony, and which had looked fair in her eyes as though it was the shining face of some angel which God had sent to rescue her.

"There; you feel better now — don't you?" with a smile. If you had seen that, you would have wondered at the mystery of change which the smile wrought in that homely face.

She stared at him a moment in blank bewilderment; then she lifted up her head, shot a swift glance around her and off to the well, and, with a little shuddering cry, grasped hold of Keefe's arm with her small claws of fingers.

"Never mind now; it's all over, you see, and here you are, safe and sound."

She was too much exhausted for any stormy burst of feeling, but she kept staring at him with the big dark eyes, out of which the great tears kept oozing and trickling down the thin cheeks; and still she clung to him with both hands. The sight moved Keefe to the heart. He wiped away the tears with a corner of the child's buff apron, noticing for the first time how nice and tasteful everything was about her.

"It was lucky I heard you scream — wasn't it? I was in the road, across the fields, when I heard the first cry, and, you better believe, I made tracks for it. Wasn't I just in the nick of time, though? Come, now, I wouldn't shed another tear over it."

"It was so dreadful!" said the small quivering lips. "I am such a very little girl, you know."

"Yes, I know; a very little girl, but a very brave one, too."

At that a little light came into the tear-filled eyes.

"But the water looked so dark, shining there below, and I thought I was going to be drowned in it."

"Well, you wasn't; so the thoughts wasn't true that time, you see."

"But they came so close to being!"

"If they did, a miss is as good as a mile, you know."

A bit of an amused smile came out on the child's lips. The big eyes stared in a pleased, trustful way at Keefe.

"Where did you come from?" she asked, curiously.

"O, from a place they call Agawam, a great ways off."

"O, I know. Uncle Richard has business there sometimes at the mills. He is going to take me over to see them some time, and the big looms, and the folks at work at them."

"You'll find it worth going to see," glad to perceive that her thoughts, like all children's, slipped so easily away from the terror through which she had passed, and noticing the flush coming back to the thin lips.

In a moment, however, her face grew grave again.

"It was very funny!"

"What?"

"That you happened to be passing the corn-

fields, and heard me cry. I think God must have sent you. He does things sometimes, you know."

"Yes, I know he does," Keefe answered very gravely, remembering what had happened a few hours ago.

"Uncle Richard will take me on his knee, and say, it was God did it, for certain, when I come to tell him. But I forgot. You don't know who uncle Richard is."

A few questions drew from the child some very straightforward passages of autobiography, and the circumstances which had brought her into the peril from which Keefe had rescued her.

The child was returning from her grandmother's, with whom she had been to pass the day, with a small basket of damsons, and, instead of keeping the main road, she had taken a short cut across the lots and the cornfields.

An old, ruined building has always a wonderful attraction to a child's imagination. The girl wandered around this a while, and then went to see if she could find her face down in the dark blue mirror of the well. Leaning far over the low curb, she became dizzy, and lost her balance. As she fell over, she clutched the boards, and hung there, probably not more than two minutes,

although the time seemed hours to her. All things considered, her escape did savor of the miraculous.

Keefe would not let her dwell on it long, for the small face was growing white, and the small figure chilled and shuddering, as she went over with the scene. Keefe found the hat which the child had taken off and dropped in the grass before she surveyed herself in the well. It was very amusing to see the dainty way in which she smoothed the fresh blue ribbons, and the air of anxiety with which, after perching the hat on that glossy brown head, she asked his opinion about its appearance.

He assured her that it looked as though it had come straight from the show-window of the milliner, on which the child drew a long breath of immense relief and delight.

"What is your name?" she asked, in a moment.

"Keefe Bartlett."

"O, what a funny one! Where did you get it?"

"I got it long before I can remember; and I hadn't any choice in it. What is your name, little girl?"

"Bessie Staines; nine years old last May."

"Well, the sun is getting behind the hill, and it will be night before long. Can't you manage to walk now?"

She got up with Keefe's help; but once on her feet, she was quite equal to taking care of herself.

"Have you very far to walk?"

"Three quarters of a mile up the road to Creek Farm. That's where we live."

"That is my way, too; so I will go along with you."

They found the little covered basket, with the great purple damsons inside, under the old apple-tree where the girl had left it. Bessie insisted on Keefe's helping himself to these; and such juicy, honeyed ripeness had never crossed his lips and cooled his palate before.

Then they took the basket between them and started off. Bessie had by this time largely recovered from her fright, and chattered on to her friend as though she had known him all her life.

In the course of her talk it transpired that her father had died several years before, and that she lived with her mother and her uncle Richard Staines, who was a widower, and had no children

of his own. But it was evident enough that this uncle had managed to gain a father's full share in the heart and admiration of his little niece, Bessie Staines.

Somehow, as she talked, Keefe's heart warmed singularly towards this stranger, whose face he had never seen. If he had only had such a father or such an uncle, Keefe fancied it would have all been so different with him! It did not seem difficult now for Keefe Bartlett to believe there were kind, generous people in the world.

And the little girl, with her small, thin face, and the wonderful eyes, which had the purplish glow of the damsons in the basket, went on chattering to him like the soft rustle of a brook winding and cooing among the reeds. She told him about the wax doll with the wonderful eyes, which uncle Richard had brought from the city last Christmas, and which was quite too large to go in her stocking; so they had to substitute one of his; and of the pretty China tea-set — white, with a rim of crimson — which he had given her on her last birthday; and the child's voice clung with a dainty lisp to the sibilants, and slipped with a little musical tinkle among the liquids.

Poor Keefe! no fresh, innocent child's heart

and thought had ever unveiled themselves to him before. It half seemed, as he moved along the old country roads, with the barberry bushes and the flaming plumes of golden-rod on either hand, that an angel was walking by his side. If that small, freckled, spare-faced Bessie Staines, whose only beauty was her wonderful plum-purplish eyes, had blossomed out suddenly with great silver wings, he would hardly have been amazed.

At last she grew silent, gazing up into his face; and when he looked down into hers a little smile came about Keefe's lips, and the little girl smiled back in turn, a bright, trusting smile, which went away down into Keefe's heart and warmed it.

"I was thinking what a good man you must be," she said.

"What made you think that, child?" greatly touched and pleased.

"Because you started right off to find me, just as soon as you heard my cry, and knew somebody was in trouble. If you had been a bad man you would have passed right on and not minded. Don't you see?"

"I don't see that I am a good man, Bessie," an unutterable plaintiveness in his voice, as he

remembered how very near he had come to one deed that day.

The child instinctively felt the pain in Keefe's voice. She could not have put her feeling into words, but she unconsciously drew nearer to him, with a vague desire to do something for him, she could not tell what, and her big, bright eyes kept themselves on his face.

"Well, do I look like a good man?"

He was sorry after the words were out. It seemed to him that the child's pure instinct must penetrate to the evil which lay at the bottom of Keefe's soul. He would have shrunk and turned away, but she held him by those wonderful, searching eyes. He half felt as though he stood in the presence of some sibyl, who was to utter his doom, only Keefe had never heard of tripods, and oracles, and things of that sort.

In a few moments the answer came. The child was not conscious of it; but she felt the pain and mournfulness in Keefe's eyes as he returned her gaze.

"Yes, you do look like a good man; and I know you are one. Nobody in the whole world could make me believe anything else of you," the thin face flushing with excitement.

Keefe fairly hugged himself with a sudden joy. After all, this child's fine, pure instinct found something good in him. It must be there, then. He, too, would find it for himself. From that hour the Agawam mill-hand rose into some new sense of manliness, courage, self-respect.

At that moment the two reached the summit of a long hill, and the farm-house stood full in view — a wide, ample, gray old homestead, with a blue drift of smoke above the chimney, and the cows in the side-yard, and the orchard at the back, and, a little way off, the steely gleam of the creek, which had given its name to the farm.

"That's my home," said the child, with a spring of pleasure. "You will come along, too; and I can tell them what you have done for me, and they will like you so much! Uncle Richard will lay his hand on your head and bless you."

How Keefe longed to go! How like Arcadia, how like the very golden gate of Paradise itself, the wide, motherly old farm-house looked to the friendless, solitary youth!

But Keefe did not know the hearts inside, and did not suspect he had that day done a deed which would give him a life-long claim on their gratitude.

"No, Bessie, I can't come now," the voice a little strained and hoarse. "I hope I shall see you again some time; but now I must keep moving on."

"But where will you go?" a shadow of anxiety and trouble in her face.

"O, I can't tell you. You wouldn't know if I should try. Shake hands and bid me good by now."

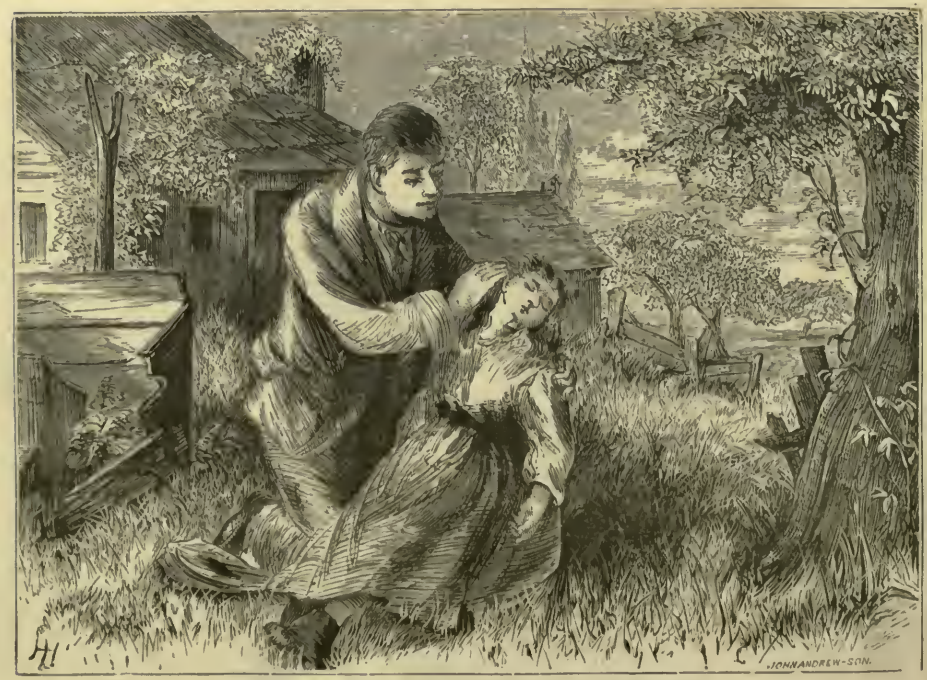
She gave him the small, meagre things. He grasped and held them a moment in his big paws, then let them go, and hung the basket on her arm.

"Good by," Keefe said.

"Good by," answered Bessie.

She was close by the front gate now. She turned back when she had gone a few steps, came close to him, and put up her mouth for a kiss. And Keefe bent his lips down to hers, and gave her not one kiss, but two or three; and so they parted without another word.

He went on, while in the west the saffron clouds dulled slowly, and the brown twilight filled the air. He had walked a long way, and he found that he was growing very tired. When the stars came, like conquerors, into the sky, and



BESSIE STAINES, NINE YEARS OLD. Page 66.

filled the night with their immortal loveliness, Keefe went into a small grove of pines, which grew, like a dark, solid hem, on the edge of a strip of woodland, and flung himself down on the warm, dry bed of cones and needles, luxurious to his tired muscles as a couch of down.

The air quivered with strong balsamy fragrances, the winds rustled with plaintive murmurs among the pines; and in a few moments a slumber, whose sound sweetness a king might have envied, fell upon Keefe Bartlett.

A little way off, at Creek Farm, he would have been welcomed that night as no king could be. Bessie Staines had told the story of her peril and rescue as only a child could have told it, while loving hearts listened with shudders of amazement and horror, and tears of unutterable thankfulness.

The farm hands were started off in various directions to find him and bring him back. But Keefe Bartlett slept on, with the plaintive rustle of the winds in the pines overhead.

Rox Coventry reached Plum Point Station precisely two minutes in advance of the train. There were not many passengers on board. Rox stretched his tired muscles at full length on one

of the seats; and, thinking over his tramp, the figure, big and shambling, of Keefe Bartlett rose up before him.

"I've a good mind to write the whole thing to Edith, and let her know the fellow got her twenty-five dollars, after all. Curious, how he acted! It did seem, as Edith fancied, a matter of life and death to him."

Suddenly Rox whipped a small portfolio out of his pocket, seized some paper and a pencil inside, and wrote rapidly; then the light faded in the west, and with snort and shriek the train swept him on to New York.

CHAPTER IV.

EDITH FOLGER came up the lane that afternoon with her sun-hat aslant on her head; in her cheeks a soft red-brown flush, like the streak in some great golden pear when it is ripe to the core; her eyes just one wide sparkle of happiness — you could not have told their color now; they looked like two round wells of golden light; her hair, of a dark, chestnut shade, with golden lustres, waved about her temples; and her dress was some airy sort of fabric that took to light flutters, in the swells of the breeze, almost as easily as the leaves overhead.

It was a summer afternoon, the very last one of that year; but there was no hint of frost or falling away anywhere. There were overflowing warmth, life, ripeness, in everything, in the great pasture meadow on one side, with the cattle in the moist, lush grass, and in the great apple

orchards on the other, filling the air with a fine, pure sweetness.

Edith Folger would have been puzzled herself to tell why she was so happy this afternoon. She had been off in the woods for a couple of hours, gathering flowers and things, soft, green pencillings of ferns, and swamp-pinks, and wild lilies that looked as though they had gathered and held the summer's heat in their great flaming tubes, and bits of curious mosses and lichens, all heaped together in a bit of curiously woven rustic basket.

She loves the cool, still woods, with all their mysterious twitter and rustle of sounds; the ripples of breezes, or sudden tide-like swells of winds; the wide, solemn breadth and freedom; the laughters of little brooks that seem forever blundering and catching their breaths among the stones. She likes to sit still under some vast greenery of ash or chestnut, and imagine the branches are the arches and groves of some Gothic cathedral, or to go dabbling among the short, crisp grass, the sassafras thickets, and ferny hollows, hunting for all kinds of treasures. She never comes home without finding them, too, any more than those people who have eyes to see, go

down to the shore when the tide is out, and come back without finding *their* treasures, shells and sea-weed, with briny pungent scents clinging to them; and to crown all, those delicate, wonderful sea-plants, that seem like the ferns of Fairy-land.

It is two years since Edith Folger stood in the front door and said good by to her cousin, when he set out for his tramp to Plum Point Station. Looking at her to-day, however, you would hardly perceive that she has grown a week older. It is the same young, delicate face, with the sweetness which goes deeper than the bloom, and seems a kind of "striking through" of the soul.

Edith Folger has come up here to Bayberry Hills, for a week or two, just to feast sense and soul with the beauty and blessedness of the country. Bayberry Hills is a thinly populated, old-fashioned town, a dozen miles from Agawam. It is a wonderful place, — at least Edith thinks so, — with its delicious old wood-patches, its slopes of pastures, and sea-like sweeps of meadows, its old road-forks, too, that lead to great motherly farm-houses, and past crumbling stone walls, and

into such enchanting arcades of cool, green hollows.

Edith felicitates herself every day, that she came here instead of going to some gay watering-place, which would have swept her into the great orbit of parties and all kinds of fashionable dissipations.

She has just had a week of perfect freedom, like the birds and the striped squirrels she sees darting in and out among the brambles.

The old country hotel, too, where she has been stopping, with its wide, cool piazzas and its great airy chambers, belongs to a past generation. One of these days, perhaps, it will come out of its dear old shell, and take on the fine airs of a fashionable resort for city tourists; but it is not, thus far, infected with any intermittent heats of ambition.

It stands broad, and pleasant, and homely behind the shades of its great black-heart cherries, where the birds wake up Edith every morning to a day full of blessedness, and peace, and beauty; to a life a good deal like that old paradise where Eve lost her crown.

There are other people staying at the hotel, nice, quiet, sensible people; some of them family

acquaintances, who leave Edith to her own moods, and are not perpetually buzzing about and bothering her.

Edith's father comes up every night or two. He was afraid she would be lonely when he brought her out to this dead-and-alive old town. Edith has smiled to herself a good many times, as well she could, thinking of that groundless fear.

Then such feasts of fresh cream and mountain berries, and bread that seems to hold still some old honeyed flavor of the mellow grain-fields, and cold chicken and crystal spring-water, that makes Edith think of old, wet, mossy rocks, and cool, fresh mint, growing all around. "Papa, it is just food for the gods," Edith says, once in a while, in a burst of enthusiasm, and her little ripple of a laugh at the end.

So, going up through the lane to-day, with the summer's glow and ripeness all about her, Edith hears suddenly the sound of the stage-horn, the hills and hollows which have been waiting all day seizing hold of the sounds, and shaking them back in sweet wonderful echoes. Edith stands quite still in the broad lane to hear. A few rods beyond, it joins the highway, and less than a

quarter of a mile below, you can see the broad white piazzas of the hotel.

Edith Folger likes immensely the sound of that old stage-horn, and the echoes that come rushing after it. These carry her back to the stories her dead grandmother used to tell of life two thirds of a century ago, of the work, and the frolics, and the gossip; and when the echoes faint, and fall, and fall among the hills, she thinks they are like tender, mournful ghosts of voices out of that old time. And so listening with her sun-hat aslant on her head, and her willow basket of "wood things" in her hand, the stage comes along, and the two or three passengers inside and the driver catch a sight of the girl standing there, and of the sweet upturned face.

Edith Folger has the graces and airs of young-ladyhood at command, but she has put them all off at Bayberry Hills, and is as natural as the birds and squirrels which she watches, and that watch her in turn among the branches. So she stands still, and looks up at the stage with a kind of childish curiosity, as it comes rolling and lumbering along. There are faces inside; that is about all she is conscious of, for her eyes meet the

driver's, and somehow they stay there till he is out of sight.

"It is curious," murmured Edith to herself, as the stage rolls on, churning up a yellow mist of dust with every revolution of the wheels, "but I have seen that face before. I'm sure I have, somewhere."

It was a large, square, sun-burnt face, that stage-driver's; he wore a straw hat, the rim a good deal spattered with mud from the hollows in the road, and a thin, brown coat, well enough in its way, and suited to his work.

Yet Edith Folger had seen in his intent, puzzled gaze, a half recognition like her own. "It is very funny," she said to herself, two or three times.

Then Edith remembered that it was almost time for the train that stopped at the depot, two miles away, and which would probably bring her father, who would be set down at the door by the hotel carryall, the stage running down daily from the up-hill country, into which the railroad had not yet been opened.

Edith, coming out now on the highway, walked at a more rapid gait. On either side lay the

wheat-fields sunning their brown reaches in the summer's last light. There were stone walls with network of raspberry bushes, and ragged fringes of gnarled apple-trees.

As Edith went on, there came up to her suddenly, without any link of association that she could find, — yet she never thought of that; things go and come with all of us without our hunting up their causes and connections, — the face she had seen two years before, looking at her from over the hedge. She saw it all — the strange, fierce look in the deep-set eyes; the pain there, too, which had haunted her so afterwards, and made an ache in her own heart. Then the talk with Rox all flashed back as clear as though it had happened yesterday; and then Edith remembered the letter he had written her on the cars, and the strange scene which had occurred on his walk to Plum Point Station. It was singular, too, Edith thought now, that she and Rox Coventry had never alluded to this matter. It was a mere oversight on both sides. They were not young people in whose lives very little was happening. They had change, excitement, variety, more or less; consequently a single incident, though it might be quite absorbing at the moment, soon

slipped into the background to make room for others.

Edith had been immensely interested at Rox's account of that odd interview on the road, but she had not seen him for some time after this occurred; and then there was so much else to talk about. She was so intent on all this, that she did not hear the sound of wheels to the right of her. In a moment the carryall swept round into the highway. She was close to the hotel now; there was a shout, "Halloa, Edith!" and turning around sharply, she saw her father and Rox Coventry sitting there in the old vehicle, side by side. A few minutes later they were in the house, and Rox was relating, in his droll way, what a search he had had after Edith, and how like some ancient knight he had followed her all the way from Agawam up to Bayberry Hills, in whose solemn depths she had chosen to bury herself, like some broken-hearted Ophelia, in a brook, he would like to say; only Rox declared that he had a tender muscle, that would twinge every time he came to making fun of Ophelia. He never had quite forgiven that handsome, mooning Hamlet for treating her as he did. It

was very funny the way Rox talked; all through flashes and ripples of Edith's laughter.

"I am so glad you have come, Rox! Won't we have grand times! Such wonderful places as I have to show you! Rockeries, and pineries, and glens, and deep cavern-like hollows, fair and odorous, where Titania might have built her throne."

"What a pretty fancy, uncle Bryant! She has drunk the nectar of these hills, and they have made a poet of her."

Edith's father laughed. "O, you children," he said, "how long do you suppose it will be before the hard, dull prose of life takes this pretty nonsense out of you?"

He was used to their talk, and he enjoyed its flash, and sparkle, or sometimes its keen, blade-like glitter, but thought the whole was worth about as much as a handsome — soap-bubble!

Edith was in a kind of seventh heaven of ecstasy now that Rox had come, and went on laying plans for to-morrow in a rapturous fashion. He is very little changed from the Rox we left two years ago, trudging down the railroad. Two months since he graduated at college, with a good deal of credit to himself. Everything has gone

smoothly and gracefully with him all this time, as of old; he takes it for granted that it always will. Yet he is silent, and looks at the brightness in Edith's face with a kind of grave concern, while she is making her plans for the to-morrows.

"Won't it be just perfect, Rox?" she ends her pretty flowery programme of woods, and rocks, and "things."

"It would be, Edith; only I must be off with uncle Bryant to-morrow morning."

It all had to come out then. Rox was going out west on the plains, up among the awful silences and eternal snows of the Rocky Mountains. This was to be no picturesque summer-holiday's campaign among the Adirondacks, but a man's strong, muscular wrestle with the great primeval forests and forces of creation.

Rox wanted to mingle in the mad rush and joy of the buffalo-hunt, to bivouac on the plains, to steep thirsty soul and sense in that intoxicating freedom of mountain, and wilderness, and prairie.

There was no use of book-burrowing while this sting and thirst were in his blood, Rox averred. What he must have now was the wild gallop of the plains; he must go to sleep at night wrapped in his blanket, with the roar of the winds in the

old pines, and the tramp of the thunder overhead. He would come back after a while, in a year at most, and settle down to civilization and study again; but his mind was made up. He was to start in a few days with several of his classmates, who were to accompany him on his expedition.

"There was a savage in every man. It must have its day," Rox said, epigrammatically.

Edith had listened to all this with a shadow growing into the brightness of her face. Rox's programme shattered all her pretty flowery one; but she was a sensible girl. The hills, and woods, and all the wonder and beauty, would be waiting for her still.

"Papa, what do you think about it all?" she asked, anxiously, when Rox had slipped out a moment.

"I don't more than half approve of it," slowly smoothing his whiskers, which had gathered an extra touch of frost in these two years. "It strikes me the whole thing is a hair-brained adventure; but, then, every man must take his own life into his hands, and shape it according to the forces that are in him. This new, wild life will try Rox's mettle. He isn't old enough or

steady enough, I fear, and may fall into bad company."

"O, papa, don't! You make me shiver," broke in Edith, with the impatient abruptness of a petted child. "If anything should happen to Rox—"

But at that moment the tea bell rang, and he came back.

After supper was over, they went out on the veranda, and sat there while a great yellow moon swung slowly up over the hills, and the earth grew beautiful and transfigured with light, and yet it was not the light of the sun.

On the other side of the veranda Edith's father talked politics and stocks with some of his friends.

"What are you thinking about, Edith?" asked Rox, at last.

She had been sitting very still, watching the stars as they slowly drifted—bright, golden points among the depths of blue. She turned now, and looked at her cousin, a little grave smile just unbending the line of her lips.

"I was wondering what would happen before you and I saw another summer-moon come up among her stars, and gaze down on us. Ah,

Rox, it is a terribly long way to the Rocky Mountains!"

"And a jolly time I mean to have of it, going back to primeval things, and living after the pattern of old Father Adam. I doubt whether we have improved much on him. Don't you think it will be glorious, Edith?" — getting up, and leaning his head against one of the pillars, where a mass of clematis hung, the dark-green embroidered thickly with its small, pale blossoms, like stars that have dropped from among their sisters overhead, and grown a little dim before they reached the world.

"Yes," doubtfully, — "I suppose it is glorious. Only so many things might happen, you know; and if any evil should come to you of any kind, O, Rox, I think that would break my heart!"

Rox Coventry looked at the sweet face upturned to him in the moonlight; the trouble and the tenderness there spoke to whatever was best in him. He loved his cousin Edith, probably, better than anything in the world.

"My dear little Queen Mab," — this was one of the names he had given her when they were boy and girl together, — "nothing harmful is going to happen to me. Don't you let any ab-

surd fears get to croaking in your sensitive little soul. Send them packing. Do you know," — going with his fine instinct straight to the core of her words, — "if I were about to go wrong, do anything that would make the devil have a chuckle over me, the thought of your dear little self would hold me back from all that?"

"O, Rox, it does me good to hear you say that!"

"Does it? Well, then, here goes some more to the same tune. If you were anything but my own cousin, Edith Folger, I should propose to you one of these days, and if you refused me, and took some other man, why, I would just shoot him!"

"O, Rox!"

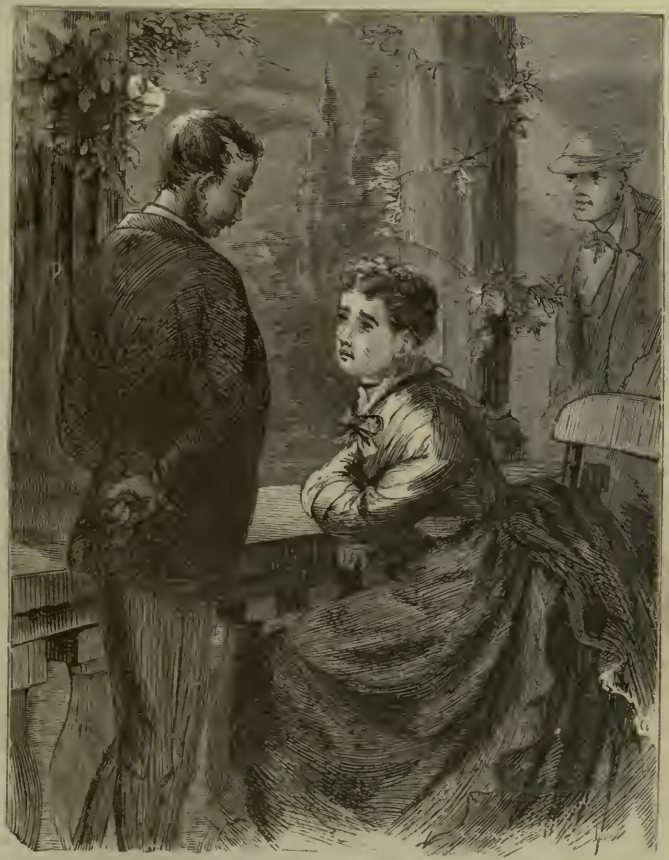
Perhaps she flushed a little at that speech, but I am not quite sure of it. She was so honest and simple by her very birthright! and then the youth sitting there was just her "cousin Rox," so like a brother to her, that she could hardly conceive of him in the relation of a lover; but she laughed out a moment later, as the oddness of his speech struck her.

Somebody, coming out on the side veranda that moment, heard the laugh, that had in it some soft,

clear sound of billows shaken by the winds. He turned and looked. It was the driver of the Bayberry stage. He had just left the dining-hall, where he had taken his supper with the "hands," and the sight of that great, golden shield of a moon drew him outside.

That intent, puzzled gaze, with which he had seen Edith standing in the lane that afternoon, came into his eyes again. Then they turned and rested on Rox. He gave a start; his jaws closed themselves tightly together. You could see that his brown face grew pale in the moonlight. He had recognized Rox Coventry.

Once or twice the driver half drew forward, as though he was about to address Rox; then seeing how immersed he was in his talk with Edith, he dropped back again; but he kept on watching the two, his fingers working nervously together, his breath coming in short, excited gasps, until the tears came into his eyes; and overhead the moon looked down from her state in the skies, and pulses of wind throbbed and sank among the gleaming stars of the clematis; and at last, when the blur came into his eyes, and the figures grew dim before him, the stage-driver turned suddenly on his heel, and walked away; and Rox and his



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cousin, absorbed in their own affairs, had not so much as known he was there.

They went on with their talk for an hour or two afterwards. It was to be their last one for a long time, as Rox must take the earliest down train in the morning. In view of this the talk was wonderfully grave, although every little while the old gayety would break through in a glittering spray of jests.

He made all sorts of fine promises to Edith of what he was to do. However, Rox Coventry was a brave, manly fellow. When he made a promise he felt his honor was pledged to it, like those old knights he was rather fond of quoting. He was standing just on the threshold of manhood; he was his own master; he had plenty of money; and the world was all before him, to make of it what he liked. The horoscope looked very fair, and yet — and yet —

After a while Edith's father and some of the house guests came around to the side of the piazza where the cousins sat, and the talk became general.

At last they all went into the house, and the moon and the stars had the night to themselves.

Not quite. On one side of the house, under

the great, cavernous shadows of the black-heart cherries, broken into occasionally by long, stiletto shapes of moonlight, the stage-driver was pacing back and forth in a rapid way. He took off his hat, and wiped his forehead with a hand not just steady.

"I know it must be he with the first glance," he murmured to himself. "I should have known that face and that light, jaunty carriage of the head if I'd met them in Gibraltar. Bless him! How I longed to speak to him, and tell him— But I never could tell him all. Part of that must be a secret until we both get where all secrets are laid bare. Yet I should have liked to take his hand, and had him smile on me once, as he did that day.

"I know, too, I'd seen that girl's face before, when I came on it in the lane. It looks as though it might have dropped right down out of the skies. How softly she spoke to me that day, and what a great pity there was shining in her eyes, as they looked over the hedge at me! I answered her roughly, too, like a brute, when she only meant to do me good.

"How strange it's happened that we've all met here under the same roof! It makes me

hold my breath thinking how different it all might have been, and there was only one moment between.

"To-morrow I must see him, get a word, and that shake of the hands; and, if there's time and a chance for it, I'll tell him what that twenty-five dollars did for me."

It was Keefe Bartlett, the stage-driver, pacing back and forth in the shadowy depths of the great black-hearts, who had this talk all to himself.

These two years have wrought a perceptible change in Keefe. Some inward force has been working outward with him. His limbs have knit themselves into firmer shape; his gait has improved; the old slouch is slowly dropping from his shoulders; he looks at least five years older; and his soul has got more and more into his face, and softened and moulded the homeliness there; the gray deep-set eyes, have an honest look when they answer you, as they are always ready to do with their clear, open gaze.

These two years have been chiselling out a good many things for Keefe Bartlett besides his face and figure. They have brought him into some very hard places, it is true; but no hour

has ever closed around his soul its prison walls of despair; no madness has fired brain and heart, as it did that day when he sat by the railroad in the hollow and waited, to this day nobody but Keefe knows for what — nobody but Keefe Bartlett and — God!

He has dipped into a variety of employments during this time; but no money that was not fairly earned has soiled that hard palm of his. He has sold papers on the cars, been porter, errand-boy, office-clerk; and one time, when he was in great straits, he remembered his old knack at entertaining the Agawam hands with little, homely, improvised comedies; and with the friendly advice of one of the applauding crowd, Keefe actually went to the Bowery Theatre, and made an engagement on one of the minor parts in some old English comedy that happened to be having a popular run at the time. He succeeded so well in his part that it is altogether likely he would have made a further engagement, had not an opportunity to drive an express-wagon turned up at this juncture.

Keefe thought he was wonderfully in luck now, and had kept at this business a number of months, when it brought another chance in his way. This

was, to take charge of the daily stage from Black-Hawk Mountain, a favorite up-country resort, to Bayberry Hills, the distance between the two being a little less than forty miles. Keefe had passed most of these two years in the city; but he still had the old longing for broad, green reaches of fields, and springs by the wayside, and cool, sweet scents, and blessed silences of the woods, which had driven him away from the hot, stifling city, and landed him at last in the Agawam Cotton Mills.

It was now about two months since Keefe had entered on this stage-driving. He enjoyed it vastly. Besides, it paid better than anything he had ever done in his life before. Then Keefe had an eye for scenery; and the landscapes on the whole route, with their hill and river views, their farm homesteads, and picturesque forks of roads, and great surging billows of woods, seemed waiting in glad patience for the artist who was so long in coming. They could afford to wait —those hills, and fields, and woods of God!

There was a point in the stage route from which the distance to Creek Farm could hardly be more than three miles. Keefe never passed this place without thinking of the little girl with

the thin, childish face, and the wonderful dark eyes, that searched him with their curious, wistful gaze; and he seemed to hear again the soft, lisping voice in the warm, brown twilights, as it said, "O, you are a good man! I know you are a good man. Nobody could make me believe anything else of you." He had heard those very words, with the catch and lisp in them, breaking into the dark and chill of many an hour of his life, and making warmth and glow there.

Some day, when the chance offered, Keefe intended to go over to the old farm-homestead, and have a look at it all. He had a kind of affection for the whole place — the wide, ample house, the great barn-yard, set in a green oval of orchards and pastures; and Keefe had a hope that he might find hanging on the big front gate, or leaning out of some window, the little girl with the freckled face and the wonderful eyes, which had looked up at him in such wild terror from out of the old well. If he should see her, — the little Bessie Staines that had kissed him good by that night, — he must go right up and speak to her; and Keefe forgot that in these two years she might have changed, like himself.

So at last he came out from the shadows of

the trees into that still, saintly moonlight; and there, because his heart was full with a reverent, overflowing gladness, Keefe instinctively, and for the first time in his life, took off his hat and thanked God.

The next morning, when he inquired for Rox Coventry, he learned that he had left for the down train an hour before.

CHAPTER V.

"NOW, Brownie, isn't that a supper for a king, instead of a little bit of shiny colt like you?"

It was a pretty sight, — the world is full of just such little homely improvised side scenes, and the artist never gets there at just the right moment, — that young girl standing in the deep, grassy side-yard, and a colt close to her; a small, graceful five-months, with the glossiest chestnut coat, a slender, tapering neck, and a nose tipped with white, as though a great fleck of foam was caught and hung there.

The girl's hands were full of small summer apples. You could just see, straggling over the barn-yard bars, the tip edges of the tree where she had picked the fruit, sweet, mellow, with a sea-green tint, and an apple-y scent that would just have made your mouth water.

The girl was right. It was a lucky colt, that

was banqueted in that fashion, and he kept running his cold, white-fringed nose into her hands in just that frank, greedy way, which is natural alike to babies and quadrupeds.

The girl had on a pink gingham dress, which became her rather sallow skin. It would probably clear up into a ruddy olive by the time she got deep among her teens; she looked as though she might be skirting their edges now. She was bareheaded, and the wind was taking small liberties with her hair, which was a bright brown, mopped carelessly about her head.

The sunset light was all around the girl — all around Creek Farm, indeed, at this time. It had a way of lying there lovingly before it went down behind the broad, scraggy shoulder of the western hills. The last warmth and light fell now upon meadow and orchard, and broad wheat-fields and up-hill pasture-lands, which all went to make up the great farmstead, and on one side, winding in and out among the hollows and fern-pastures like a big coiled chain, flashed the steely-blue waters of the creek which had given its own name to the whole.

There was no artist that time to catch Brownie and his young mistress, and the warm, fading

light, and turn a square foot of canvas into poetry; but there was a pair of eyes who saw this picture, and who enjoyed it all in a way which no artist could possibly have done. It was only the driver of the stage from Bayberry Hills to Black-Hawk Mountain. He had walked over from the hotel and lost his supper for this little scene, and he would not have grudged the price of a week's suppers for it.

There he stands, leaning on the stone wall, in the shadow of some big clumps of barberry bushes. His large features are mobile with expression now; the soul has got up into and quickened the tanned face; the deep-set eyes brighten and flash. How he watches the girl as she pats the face and smooths the shining coat, and slips the apples deftly into the colt's mouth, talking to the creature, too, in little sentences that slide and ripple softly along her young voice; the voice the young man out there by the barberry bushes would have known anywhere, because of some words it once said to him, and that he has been hearing in his soul ever since — "O, I *know* you are a good man! Nobody in the whole world could make me think *you* wasn't a good man."

Keefe Bartlett has come over to Creek Farm

to-night, because a longing drew him there. He had no idea of making himself known to anybody. The most he had hoped for was, that he might be lucky enough to get a chance look at the little girl he had pulled out of the well. If she had come plump in his way, he might have shaken hands with her.

Keefe is greatly amazed at the change in Bessie Staines. These two years seem so very short to him as he stands there and remembers that day —the day of all his life! She has shot up half a head, and the peaked face is plumper and prettier. It will be growing that year by year, as it matures; but Keefe does not know that; indeed, he knows very little about girls any way.

He gazes and gazes, and his face shines with a real gladness. "I'm glad I came over to see. It's all been going right with her, I know," he murmured to himself.

Brownie has licked up the last apple from Bessie's palm.

"There isn't another one, you see," holding up her hands before the large, bright eyes, that quiver and flash, showing the high-mettled creature Brownie is, and how, out in the pasture, she

can dart, and sweep, and scamper, fleet as the winds themselves.

At that moment somebody came up through the lane into the road, where Keefe was standing by the barberry bushes. He was a rather tall man, with a broad, generous kind of build, surmounted by a large head, whose shape would have struck one used to observing those things. The thick hair was getting very gray. Under it was a sun-browned, shrewd, kindly face, homely, perhaps, but not common.

You knew, as soon as it turned itself on you, that thought and character were behind. The man was evidently a farmer; he was in his shirt-sleeves, and had been among his men mowing a three-acre lot that day. He was tired now, for he was not so young as he had been twenty years ago. The feet made no sound as they moved through the long grass of the lane. It is doubtful, however, whether Keefe Bartlett would have heard a very solid tramp at that moment.

The farmer's gray eyes opened wide with a puzzled curiosity, as he caught a full view of the stranger in the shadow of the big barberry clump. He saw, too, the picture of Bessie and Brownie in the side-yard; he had seen it a good many

times before, and always thought it a pretty one, but hardly striking enough to draw strangers up on one side of the highway, and hold them there as if they were magnetized.

The light was full on Keefe's face; the farmer saw the intense, breathless look there, the feelings at work in all the features. "What did it mean?"

"Good evening, sir." It was a pleasant, cordial voice; yet Keefe started as though a pistol had gone off at his ear. Then he turned and saw the farmer in his skirt-sleeves, and the gray-*ing* hair, and the kindly, thoughtful face under it.

"O, very, sir," Keefe stammered, reddening a good deal, as though he had not quite a right to be there.

The farmer noticed the blush.

"She's a handsome little creature," he said. "Won't you walk in and take a look at her?"

At that moment Brownie turned her head; she had heard the voices at the gate. A sudden fire quivered in her soft eyes. With a curvet and a bound, and a stretching of the graceful slope of her shoulders, she was off like a scared fawn or a flash of lightning. She dashed through the

open gate of the orchard. She cleared that in a moment, and the next she was tossing and darting about in the open pastures, glad and free as some wild young creature of plain and forest.

Both the men laughed. Brownie's mistress joined in the fun, clapping her hands.

"Ah, Bessie, she was too quick for you that time," the farmer called over the wall.

"It was your talk scared her, uncle Richard."

When she spoke that name, the young driver turned suddenly, and stared in a curious way at the man in his shirt-sleeves.

At that moment Bessie caught sight of the stranger by her uncle, and with a child's curiosity she came towards the wall with light, springy bounds.

As she drew close to Keefe, she stared at him, perceiving he was a stranger. He smiled, and held out his hand then, not really knowing what he was doing.

At that a puzzled look came into her eyes; she gave him her hand, her gaze fastened on his face. "Why, it seems as though I know you!" she said, with a little indrawn breath, half to herself; then she turned, in her swift, straightforward fashion, — "who is it, uncle Richard?"

"That's more than I'm able to answer, Bessie," he said, struck with something — he could not tell what — in the young man's manner.

Then the girl's gaze went back to Keefe's face.

"I have seen you before; I'm sure I have," she said, very positively; "but I can't tell where."

"Perhaps I can help you," said Keefe. All this time the words had been getting ready in his throat. "Did you ever fall over a well-curb, and hang there? and did a big fellow, who happened to be going by, hear your screams, and come and pull you out?"

"O!" What a break of light there was in the small face! She clasped his hand with both of hers. "I knew you would come; I always said you would. Uncle Richard! Uncle Richard!"

She turned to the man; but she could get no farther at that moment. The surprise, the joy, and the memory of that old terror, all together, overcame her, and instead of the words there was a sudden stricture at her throat, and the tears swelled in her eyes.

Uncle Richard saw it all in a flash. He

grasped Keefe's hand, and wrung it until it ached.

"My dear fellow, how could you be so cruel as to keep yourself away all this time, so that we couldn't thank you?"

Keefe was really quite amazed at this reception.

"I didn't think I'd done anything worth the thanks," he stumbled out.

"What! not when you saved this little girl's life?" exclaimed the elder man. "But we'll talk all that over. Come right in now."

And Keefe went in: there was nothing else for him to do. Bessie Staines went with him, clinging to his hands, and with unutterable things in her eyes.

It was a wide, breezy, old-fashioned "keeping-room" into which they ushered the young stage-driver. It was one of those rooms which seem to take you right into its heart, and wrap you all around in its blessed home-atmosphere. There was nothing especial to write about. There was an ample, chintz-covered lounge on one side, with a large engraving of Washington gazing serenely at another of Lincoln on the mantel opposite. There were great, cavernous rocking-chairs, with home-made cushions, and at the windows were

bushes of sweetbrier, and clumps of quinces, and beautiful drapings of honeysuckles and creeping vines.

Keefe Bartlett had never been in a room like this before. That made it seem all the more wonderful to him.

Bessie Staines darted out of the room while her uncle was seating their guest.

"Mother, he's come! he's come!" she shouted, bolting into the kitchen, where a small, delicate woman was picking over some raspberries.

"What in the world do you mean, Bessie?" holding her hands still over the large white bowl in her lap.

"Why, you know. The man that pulled me out of the well, and kept me from drowning! I told you he would come—you know I did, mamma; and so he has; and there he is right in the other room!" Actually dancing up and down in her delight.

There was a little cry from the mother. She rose right up, without a single word; she did not even wait to drop off her kitchen apron, or wipe her fingers, which were a little stained with working amongst the fruit. She went right into

the room, and up to Keefe. He looked at her, and she looked at him, and she only thought that he had saved the life of her child. She had thought of this every day since that night.

She was a small, sallow woman, worn with ill health and a good many sorrows. But one thing could be said of her; Mrs. Staines had a *motherly* face; and when you have said that of a woman, it makes very little difference whether she is handsome or homely; she will be sure to have a beauty of her own.

She stood there a moment and looked at Keefe, and he thought of his own dead mother, and it almost seemed that she had risen up from her grave, and was looking at him with those sad, tender eyes of hers.

"Young man," she said, "I'm very glad to see you. I've wanted to thank you for my little girl."

She could not get any farther than that, but in the fulness of her motherly heart and gratitude, she just put her arms around Keefe's neck and kissed him.

And this was the stage-driver's welcome to Creek Farm. Yet never was mortal more amazed to find himself a hero than Keefe Bartlett. He

always insisted that he had done nothing worthy the least praise in rescuing Bessie Staines from her peril.

But the gratitude was wonderfully pleasant, for all that. What a supper that was, too, which followed, with its delicious brown bread, its cream and berries, and all its homely fresh farm cheer! Bessie sat next to Keefe, and buzzed away in her bright, childish fashion. He learned, too, what a search they had made for him that night, while he was sleeping in the little grove of pines, not dreaming there was in all God's world anybody who cared whether he were dead or alive.

This uncle of Bessie's, too, proved not the least wonderful of all the things which Keefe found at Creek Farm. He was a man well on the slope of his sixties; but he had one of those large, tender natures, which only get mellower with years.

"Nature had done her part well at the beginning," men of culture said, listening to the talk of Richard Staines, full of mother-wit and shrewdness, with a quaint humor shining over all the large, ripe judgment of the man. "What a pity it was such a man had not early opportunities! He would have been sure to make his mark somewhere."

At least he had made it at Creek Farm, having earned the whole large, breezy, ample homestead with the toil of his own sunburned hands; keeping his faculties alert, too, with reading and observation of one kind and another.

Richard Staines had been a widower many years, and buried his two children long ago by the side of their mother. Bessie's father had been the man's only brother. There was a sad story there; but the grave had covered all that over now in her cool, brooding silences.

Keefe was greatly drawn towards the elder man; but that was not remarkable. Richard Staines had that personal magnetism which inheres in strong, sympathetic natures. Keefe all the time was thinking how different life would have been to him if his could only have taken root in a home like this. Then there might have been some blossom and fruitage worth having; but now — Keefe thought that he had throttled that sigh in time, but Richard Staines heard it.

"What wonderful things do happen in this world!" rippled away Bessie's tongue, after they had learned about the stage-driving, and what had brought Keefe to Creek Farm.

"Do you think, uncle Richard, the stage-driving was a providence, too?"

"I hope we shall find everything a providence, my dear, in the long run."

"But so many things don't *seem* so now, uncle Richard."

"No; you remember that day, last winter, when the thermometer dropped below zero? It was the coldest, darkest, shortest day of the year; and yet it was the very one I told you on which the sun turned his face towards the earth, towards this very day that lay waiting for her, so far off among green leaves and grasses, and all the summer life and beauty. It was a long road to it, through sleet, and storm, and dark, but it was a sure one. God's roads always are. And so I think his dark providences are rolling through their wide orbits into the light and the summer at last."

When uncle Richard said this, a great, indescribable sweetness came into his face.

The family at Creek Farm had their scraps and slices of theology at all sorts of odd times and ways. I think they were better than a good many sermons.

It put a new thought in Keefe's head. What

if he should find, some day, the meaning of all that long, dark winter of his childhood, and read its meaning plain in God's light and summer?

Richard Staines was a wonderfully shrewd reader of men. "You've had a hard time of it in the world, poor fellow! I see," his secret thoughts went. "There's some pluck in you, too, or you wouldn't have struggled up through it. A plank of good, solid timber went into your foundations evidently. A good face, too, — honest and sagacious. You'll make your way."

When the supper was over, they went back into the old keeping-room, and the wind came up, and made a soft buzz at the windows.

Bessie came and sat down by his side; indeed, she seemed to regard Keefe as in some sense her especial property.

They all talked, the girl's voice slipping in and out among the others with a pretty, childish eagerness and contrast. There is no use of telling what they said; only Keefe began to feel that he had known these people — this simple, large-souled farmer and this small, fragile woman with her motherly face — all the days of his life.

The stage-driver told them about his own life, too; told, in little snatches and glimpses, more

than he intended or suspected; for they could piece the bits together, and make the outlines wonderfully like the true pattern.

When they learned that Keefe had been without a relative in the world since his mother died, away off in the dawn of his memory, they all looked at him with a great pity in their eyes, and Mrs. Staines's motherly heart just ached for him, thinking of her own boys, over whose little grass pillows the springs had gone softly, a whole score of them, with tender shadows, and soft winds, and singing birds, as though there were no such things as graves in all the world.

And so they talked on; and at last the moon came up, and peeped in curiously through the quivering leaves. It was time for Keefe to be going.

They quite insisted on his remaining all night, but it could not be. The stage for Black-Hawk Mountain started early in the morning.

"Is there anything in the world we can do for you, my young friend?" asked uncle Richard, just as they were about shaking hands with their guest. "One good turn, you know, deserves another; and what a great 'good turn' that was you did for us once!" — catching hold of Bessie's

shoulders, and drawing her suddenly to his heart, that great, warm heart, which probably loved the child a little better than anything else in the world.

"Thank you, sir, I have been more than paid," Keefe answered, fervently.

"Well, Bessie, as he won't help us, we will leave it for you to decide. What shall we do for your friend?"

Bessie, standing between her uncle and her mother, looked up at Keefe a moment with her bright, puzzled eyes; then a swift idea danced in them.

"I think," she said, "we'd better have him come and live here a while. There are so many things to show him, you know; and there's Brownie!"

The child's sudden arrow had gone straight to the mark this time. In all his pinched, starved, lonely life, this poor Keefe Bartlett had never had a home; and now, to dwell under this blessed roof, to have these people about him, to hear them speak, to look in their faces, why, it seemed to him like entering the very gate of heaven.

Of course Keefe did not expect that such a

miracle of good could happen to him; but his face flushed; there was a sudden hungry gleam in his eyes. Uncle Richard saw it; so did the mother.

There were plenty of large, breezy, comfortable chambers in the old farm-house. Keefe should have one of the best.

They both exclaimed at once that he should come.

It was all settled in a little while. The staging would only last during the summer travel; but this would probably continue for a couple of months, and during that time they would take no denial. Keefe Bartlett was to live at Creek Farm.

The stage-driver went back to Bayberry Hills in the fading moonlight, and it seemed that the whole world was changed to him; that it had grown suddenly, with its billowy fields, and its dark, rustling woods, and its hills, that seemed to stand and wait forever listening for some great secret, — it seemed as though all these had grown suddenly into a great, beautiful, happy home for Keefe Bartlett.

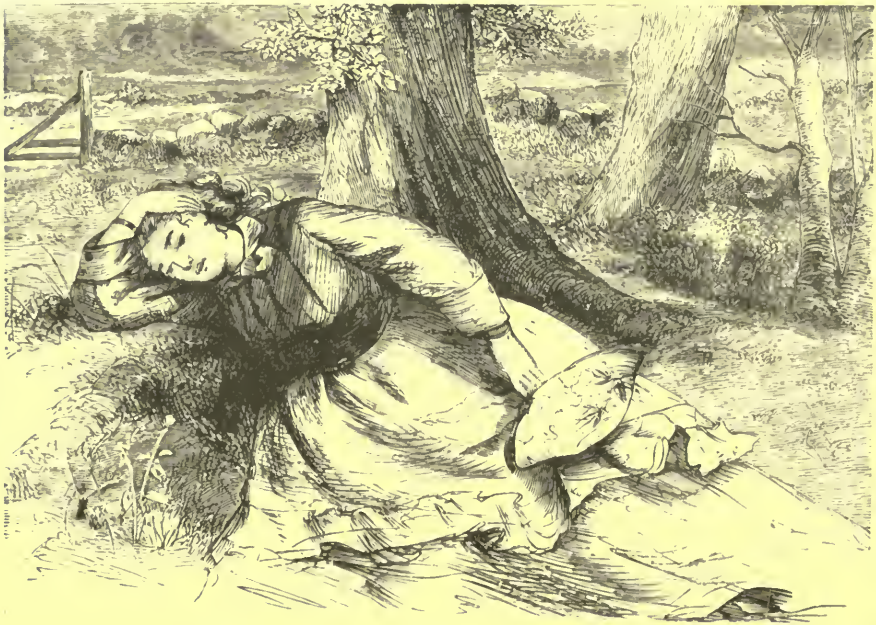
Two or three days after all this happened, Edith Folger went off into the great huckle-

berry pasture, about two miles from the hotel. On the crown there was a broad, generous swell of land, with an outlook of twenty miles; great seas of meadows, and billowy forests, and dots of farm-houses, and white little sprinklings of villages. Edith was fascinated with it all, and walked about from one point to another, finding a fresh delight in every view.

At last, however, it grew warm, and the breeze went down. She was about to start for home; but she felt tired, and there was a tempting little dimple, or hollow, in one corner of the pasture. It was a cool, woodsy place, with a great group of locusts and maples. Edith went in here, and sat down on the grass. How shady and delicious it was, with the soft little gossip of winds among the leaves!

The girl did not know how tired she was. She only thought she wanted to look up at the bits of sky through the meshes of boughs, when she laid her head down among the cool, sweet smells and the soft shadows; but in a few moments the little gossip of winds all ran into a low, drowsy tune, and Edith had fallen fast asleep under the trees.

She slept for more than an hour. She woke up



EDITH FOLGER ASLEEP. Page 110.

at last with a start. It had grown dark, and it took her some time to gather up her wits, and remember where she was. She sprang up, and came out on the edge of the group of trees, and saw that, while she had been fast asleep, the clouds had been at work. They seemed to hang in great flapping banners all around the sky. There were distant, threatening growls of thunder. The storm was coming.

Edith Folger was a brave girl, else she would not have gone foraging off into the woods, as she had been doing all these weeks; but the threatening sky rather appalled her. She reflected that she was more than two miles from home, and the storm was hurrying up. She started for the road, and in her haste took the wrong way.

Once in the highway, the girl and the clouds had a race; but it was soon evident who would be victor. They came sailing up, those great, black, bellying masses, and there were gusts of wind, and the growls grew longer and louder.

On a sudden Edith was struck with the unfamiliar face of things about her. She saw she had mistaken her way, and her heart sank. She looked about her. There was not a house in sight, only a long, hilly road, stretching its neck

of yellow sand between the stone walls which enclosed the pastures.

"O, what shall I do?" cried Edith; and if she had said one word more she would have sobbed right out.

Then she caught the sound of rattling wagon-wheels, and they were very musical to her. In a few moments the team came in sight, driven by a man in his shirt-sleeves, some bags of flour behind him. He was evidently returning from the mill below. Edith stood still, and waited for him.

"If he has a good face," she said to herself, "I shall speak to him."

The mare came on at a swift trot. She was evidently in a hurry to get home. The driver suddenly caught sight of the figure standing on one side of the road. A look of surprise came into his face. He drew up sharply, and before Edith could speak, he had accosted her.

"Can I do anything for you, young lady?"

That face, that voice, could be trusted anywhere. Edith felt secure in a moment.

"Thank you," she said. "I have lost my way, and I must be two or three miles from home, and the storm is close on us."

The driver was out of the wagon, spry as though he were a young man.

"Jump right in here," he said. "We can't stop for ceremony, or the storm will get the better of us. Whoa, old Gray! My home is three quarters of a mile down the road, and the mother and Bessie will be delighted to see you."

While he was saying this, he had bundled Edith into the mill wagon, sprung in beside her, and seized the reins. Old Gray tossed her impatient head, and they were skimming over the road. It was all the work of a moment.

"Now, my child, how did you get here?" asked uncle Richard Staines, turning upon Edith with the smile into which that heart and soul of his had been managing to get all these years in a way that was truly wonderful.

She told him about her stopping at Bayberry Hills, and how she had wandered into the huckleberry pasture, and fallen asleep there, and, waking up bewildered by the gathering storm, had lost her way. She felt as secure by the side of this stranger as though her own father sat there; besides, she had a real curiosity to see "the mother and Bessie."

They exchanged names. Edith had heard at the hotel of Creek Farm and its owner; and he, of course, knew of the proprietor of the Agawam Cotton Mills.

This time it was the mare and the shower, and old Gray won.

But just as they got into the side-porch the first drops fell. Bessie let them in, her eyes wide with wonder at sight of the young lady uncle Richard had brought home with him. Where had he picked her up? She looked lovely enough to have dropped right out of the sky.

Then the mother came. A few words explained the whole, and with that motherly welcome Edith felt as much at home as Keefe Bartlett had done under the same roof only a few nights ago.

What a storm that was, with its sea of smiting rain, and its mad hurricanes of winds, that tossed, and wrenched, and tore through the air and over the earth hour after hour!

Yet Edith, safely housed in the old keeping-room at Creek Farm, enjoyed it immensely. She liked odd, out-of-the way adventures, like these. I think all fresh souls, old or young, do.

Uncle Richard Staines and she took a great

liking to each other at once; and Edith, without any mother of her own, was greatly drawn towards the mother-look in Mrs. Staines's face.

Bessie was very shy at first, and watched the "beautiful young lady" with wide, admiring eyes; but her uncle brought her out in a little while, and she soon buzzed away in her quaint fashion, which vastly amused Edith.

At last it began to grow dark. Of course, while the storm continued, Edith's return home was not to be so much as thought of.

"O, what if you should have to stay all night!" cried Bessie, her eyes dancing with ecstasy at the thought.

Just then Mrs. Staines came in, and announced supper; and the mill-owner's daughter enjoyed that almost, but not quite, as much as poor Keefe Bartlett had done.

It could not be just the same to her, you know.

CHAPTER VI.

EDITH FOLGER did not go home that night. The wind and the rain had all out doors to themselves, and a battle-field they made of it! Young trees were suddenly borne down in the fury of the storm; branches were snapped off and hurled away; the fences were laid low, and the house shook in all its strong old ribs.

In order that no alarm should be felt on Edith's account, uncle Richard had sent by one of the farm-hands a message to Bayberry Hills that she was safely sheltered at Creek Farm; and the girl settled herself to a pleased enjoyment of the whole adventure, even of the storm outside.

"What a frightful storm it is, Richard!" exclaimed Mrs. Staines, with a little shudder, as there came a terrible onset of wind and rain at the windows. "Did you ever know anything like it before?"

"Yes, a few times in my life, Lucy; but it's what sailors would call an 'old rouser of a gale.'"

"Are you afraid?" asked Bessie, still fluttering about Edith.

"O, no, child; I think I rather enjoy it all."

"So should I, if it were not for Keefe."

"Who is Keefe?" asked Edith, whose curiosity was awake at all points.

"O, he's the stage-driver, and he lives here; and there's a wonderful story to tell about him — isn't there, uncle Richard?"

"Yes, my dear."

"Well, now, supposing you tell it, little Miss Bessie," said Edith. "I like stories immensely."

Bessie drew a long breath; then she turned to her uncle.

"You do it, uncle Richard," she said.

"No, Bessie; that belongs to you. Nobody can tell Keefe's story so well as you."

Once fairly started, Bessie forgot everything else, and fully sustained her uncle's testimony. She set the whole scene, the old well and herself hanging there by the broken curb, and Keefe as he came to her rescue, in the most vivid, dra-

matic way before her listeners. You could not help living it all over again. Indeed, Mrs. Staines had to leave the room before the child was half through.

Edith was greatly impressed by the whole story. It flashed across her, of a sudden, that this "Keefe" must be the very stage-driver whom she had met that afternoon in the lane, and whose face had struck her with such a curious familiarity. Of course, though, she could never have seen him before.

When Edith came to learn that Bessie's preserver was actually staying at Creek Farm, and how it had all come about that he was there, she exclaimed, —

"I hope I shall see him; I'm quite curious to do it."

"The fellow is really worth knowing, Miss Folger," said uncle Richard. "He will be likely, however, to be very shy with folks like you. Still there is something shrewd, and sturdy, and original about this Keefe Bartlett, if you once get through the crust. He's had a rough time of it thus far — poor fellow! but I'm satisfied there is the making of a man in him."

Uncle Richard seldom made mistakes in his judgments of men.

"Do you think he will get through to-night, Richard?" asked Mrs. Staines, who had returned before this. "It is time he was here two hours ago."

"Yes; but he will have to get over the road in the teeth of this gale. I think he will do it, though."

Less than ten minutes afterwards there came, through howling winds and seas of rain, a thunderous knock at the side-door.

"O, it's Keefe!" shouted Bessie; and she rushed to answer the knock, anticipating everybody else, and unbolted the door.

The wind made a grab at her. It took her breath, and would have knocked her down if Keefe had not broken its force. There he stood, a big, dripping figure in the dark.

"That's you, I know," exclaimed Bessie. "The storm hasn't carried you off, after all."

"O, no — not so much as my little finger, though it's fought for me every inch of the last ten miles."

The voice was loud and hearty. It was wonderful how cheerful Keefe's tones had grown of

late; indeed, every hour since he came to Creek Farm had been working some change in him.

He was in the hall by this time, and uncle Richard came out to find that all was well with the stage-driver; and he got off his dripping overcoat, and went up to his room, and came down in a few moments, dried and hungry, and feeling only the better for his long, victorious battle with the elements.

While he sat there before a supper which would have sharpened the appetite of a far less hungry man, Bessie came out to buzz about him with her news. It was so very good, though, she held it back a moment, setting her one grand secret in a bordering of light talk.

"Uncle Richard said he knew you'd get through, Mr. Keefe."

"Yes; I made up my mind I'd hold on to that old Noah's ark of a stage until she went to pieces, or I did. Whew! how the wind did roar! A grand thunder of artillery was nothing to it. Roads will be badly washed off in places;" helping himself to huge slices of the huckleberry cake.

Bessie watched him with the secret a-dance in her radiant eyes. At last it burst out.

"Guess what has happened, Mr. Keefe!"

"I can't; the wind has played the mischief with my wits, as well as with the leaves. Anything good?"

"O, yes, splendidly good."

"Well, then, don't be cruel on a fellow; let's have it."

Bessie and Keefe were the best of friends. There was nothing in the world he was not ready to do for her. So Bessie told about the beautiful young lady in the other room, and how she had fallen asleep in the huckleberry pasture, and coming out had lost her way, and how uncle Richard had found her in the road, and brought her home in the nick of time, and how she was to pass the night on account of the storm, ending with, —

"O, I do want you to see her so! Make haste and get through with that supper."

Keefe hardly sympathized with Bessie's eagerness. Indeed, during her talk his thoughts were much occupied with his stage and horses. It is quite doubtful whether he more than half took in her story.

But his supper, greatly to the impatient chatterer's delight, was over at last, and she took hold

of his hand and led him straight into the room where Edith sat with Bessie's uncle and mother, the girl a centre of color, and grace, and loveliness that are indescribable.

Keefe gave a little start. He knew her at the first glance. Bessie introduced him with an amusing effort to observe all the proprieties. Edith recognized the stage-driver at once; but the mysterious familiarity in his face did not strike her as it had that day when he stared at her as she stood in the lane. Keefe saw that she did not remember him, but for all that he could not thaw out of the silence and awkwardness which possessed him.

Edith did her best to draw him out; but every time she addressed herself to Keefe, his heart seemed to get painfully close to his throat, and it was as much as he could do to stammer out an intelligent reply. It was like dancing in fetters.

The others saw his constraint; so, in a little while, did Edith, and with her fine tact gave over her good-natured attempt to draw the young stage-driver into conversation.

Uncle Richard came to the rescue, asking Keefe questions about the road and the storm; and here

Keefe got on well enough; but how could he talk with Edith Folger? How could he, remembering —

Of a sudden the young lady spoke, more to herself than to anybody else, the thought coming out in a breath, —

"O, dear! I wonder if this storm has got as far as Rox to-night!"

"Who is Rox?" asked Bessie, who had overheard the name. So had somebody else.

"He is my own cousin, and just like a brother to me — dearer than anybody, indeed, but papa."

"O, do tell us something about him," cried Bessie.

Rox was always a pleasant subject to Edith.

"Well, what is it you want to hear, Miss Bessie?" smiling on the eager little girl.

"O, something nice — a real good story, you know."

"A story: let me see," answered Edith, meditatively. "There are a great many good things to tell about Rox; but I don't know as I can think of just the story that will interest you."

"Didn't he ever do anything good, or generous, or funny? Those are the kind I like,"

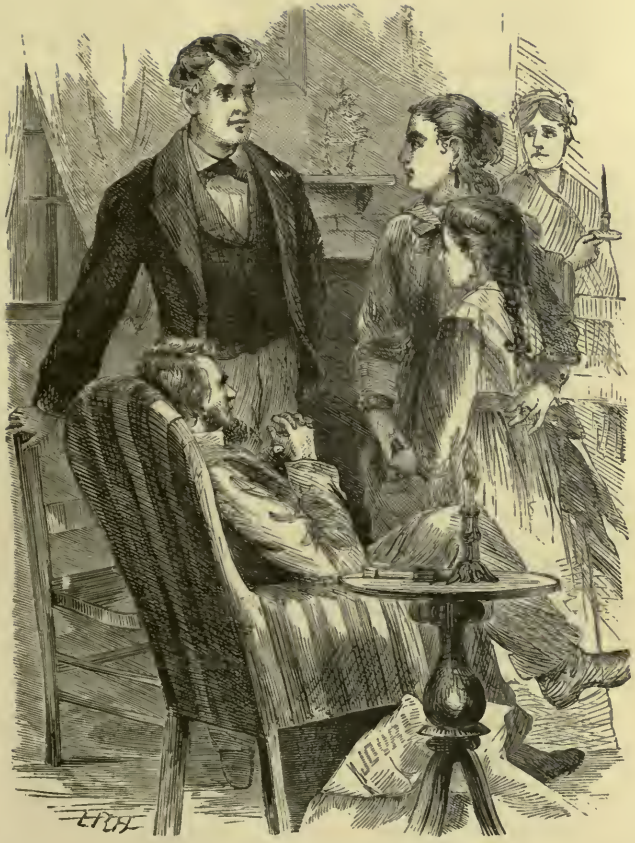
answered Bessie, quite innocent of any missing link in her pronouns.

Edith considered a moment; then her face flashed up.

"O, yes, I do remember something Rox did once that was all three," she said. "It happened a good while ago."

Bessie was all ears and eyes now. The others, too, waited for the commencement. Keefe could not tell why his heart gave that big thump, as though something was coming. But in a minute more he knew, for Edith was describing him as he sat that day just outside the hedge by her father's grounds. You could almost see him there, through the girl's words — a big, homely, brown young Caliban. Through all the hot emotion that surged within him, it did strike Keefe with a grim sense of humor, that he should have such a picture of himself held up to his gaze.

Edith repeated the talk she had had with the stranger. It was wonderful how her memory retained every word. And then she carried her listeners into the house, and went over the conversation which had transpired between Rox and herself before he set out for Plum Point Station; and



At Farmer Staines. Page 124.

Keefe held his breath so that not a syllable should escape him.

Afterwards she went over the whole scene on the railroad, making hardly a mistake from beginning to end, for Edith told it fresh and vivid, as Rox had written it to her that day on the cars.

There were tears in the eyes of all her listeners when she concluded, all but one, and his bright and dry, seemed to burn like flames in his livid face. They all felt his still agitation, but they only thought he was deeply moved by the story. Bessie drew a deep breath.

"O, if you could only learn what became of those twenty-five dollars!" she said.

"I have always been curious to know," added Edith. "I have always felt, too, that there was some history, if one could get down to it, about that money; that it was really a matter of life and death, as the boy said."

"I had a feeling of the same sort while you were talking, Miss Folger," added uncle Richard. "It is a remarkable story, and it makes me want to know your cousin Rox. We cannot always follow our good deeds to their results, but some time these will come home, bringing their sheaves with them."

Keefe's breath came hard; he was losing possession of himself. In a moment more it seemed to him that he should spring to his feet and shriek out, —

"It was *I*, Keefe Bartlett, that sat by the hedge that day; it was *I* that waited by the railroad; and when Rox Coventry gave me that money, he saved his own life and me from murder!"

Then Bessie Staines's voice slipped softly into the tumult of Keefe's thoughts.

"O, do tell us some more about Rox!"

And Edith went on to describe him — the bright, careless, handsome fellow, with his pleasant, magnetic ways and jaunty air, and bringing up one and another little scene of their childhood, sparkling with fun and comedy, as everything seemed to about Rox, he had so much bright, wonderful vitality; and at last she told about this passion for the hunt and bivouac in the woods and on the plains, which had seized him, and how he had gone off leaving them full of anxieties on his account.

It was late when Edith got through with Rox; all the while the silent figure in the corner had been watching her with its bright, dry eyes. It

had sat motionless as a statue, without making a sound or moving a muscle; yet the Agawam capitalist's daughter had some vague, faint feeling of the emotion which was stirring the soul of the stage-driver. She was not, probably, conscious of this feeling herself; nevertheless it lay at the bottom of the last thing Edith Folger did before she went up to her room that evening.

She had said her good night to the others, and Bessie had hold of Edith's hand, when the young lady turned suddenly to Keefe, who had risen from his chair, saying, —

"What shall I say to you for what you did one day for this little girl?" drawing Bessie suddenly to her side.

She said it in the sweetest, most gracious way, with her fair face uplifted to his. I despair of giving you any idea how pretty she looked at that moment, and how prettily it was done. And as he looked at her that moment, the words came to Keefe, and he could not hold them back.

"What shall I say to you for what you did that day for the boy on the railroad?"

"O, it was not *I* did that," answered Edith, with her lovely ripple of laughter. "It was Rox, you know."

"Yes, I know it was. But Rox would never have done that, you see, if it hadn't been for *you;*" and Keefe's eyes shone on the girl with a great light in them.

She turned to the others with playful archness.

"Have I been making a heroine of myself?" she asked. "I had no intention of doing so."

"We all saw that. You only told the truth, my child. But Keefe is right, after all. And I've rounded the point of my threescore years some time ago, but I hardly ever heard of a generous or noble deed without finding that, somehow, some girl or woman — it all amounts to the same thing — was sure to be at the bottom of it."

I do not believe that anything more truly beautiful and chivalric was ever said of woman than that speech of uncle Richard Staines. Do you?

The next morning, when Edith Folger inquired at breakfast for the stage-driver, she learned that he had set off an hour before for Black-Hawk Mountain.

CHAPTER VII.

"THERE'S a fight going on in there," said the stage-driver.

"Well, it's lucky for me I can keep out of that row, any way," said the second speaker, mostly to himself, as he sprang into the stage and settled down in a corner for a long nap.

It was as dreary a night as you can imagine, drearier than my pen can possibly paint for you. The tavern at "Bear Ranche" shot out its lights into the wide, yawning blackness. That long, low log building just on the edge of the great "sage desert" of the west was the sole picture of life in all the dreary landscape. The winds growled and shouted over the plains like the roar of distant seas, and shot great angry gusts of rain at the window where the traveller sat in the corner of the eastern-bound stage. The lights from the bar-room flamed out from the

small panes, and he could hear the shuffling of feet and the loud, angry voices.

He listened with a painful kind of interest, yet thankful enough that he was out of it all. He knew what men were when whiskey and rage turned them into demons.

He is a young man still, but he has learned much in the two years he has been out on the plains, one of the overseers of a large mining company.

The voices inside grow louder and fiercer. The solitary passenger wishes the stage would start. There are other travellers who will join him at the last moment, but they enjoy the warmth, and probably the tumult going on inside, too well to leave it before it is necessary, and there is some trouble with the "leader."

The "overseer" has ridden all day. His bones are stiff and tired, yet the prospect in there is not inviting. He has concluded to go on to the next station, although this involves another weary night in the stage.

"Passengers, aboard!" shouts the driver, putting his head inside the bar-room, while a gust of rain, which has been watching its chance, makes an angry rush in-doors, slapping at the faces of

some of the men there, on which there is a fresh volley of coarse oaths at rain and driver.

In a moment, and as though he were forced against his will, but drawn by some mysterious impulse which he cannot resist, the solitary passenger gets up from his corner of the stage, bounds swiftly out, despite his stiffened limbs, and enters the long, low-ceiled bar-room.

There are men scattered all around it, mostly in groups — miners, and trappers, and hunters from the Hudson Bay Company's posts, hardened and rough from their coarse, wild life of plain and wilderness. Some of them have thrown themselves half across the counter; others are gathered about the stove, telling over coarse stories about tussles with bears and brushes with Indians, while others are scattered about on boxes and chairs in all sorts of nondescript attitudes, the majority being engaged in pouring down coarse whiskey, smoking vile tobacco, and indulging in loud guffaws.

The new comer stood still a moment looking over this scene. It did not surprise or horrify him. He was used to just such sights; yet there was a certain air of cool self-possession in his manner, which showed that he was not in

sympathy with the coarse, riotous spirit of the place.

He was a large-framed, solidly-built young man, deep in his twenties. His face was dreadfully sunburned, but the large-moulded features had a certain strength and good-looking homeliness about them. He wears a coarse gray suit and a fur cap — just the things for a traveller in those latitudes and at that season — it is now on the edge of November. The men around the fire certainly look more picturesque in their red and gray shirts and mud-stained leathern breeches.

The crowd stared at the new comer with an idle kind of curiosity. Most of the travellers were at the ranche over night, and would take the stages east or west the next morning, and fresh arrivals were nothing remarkable. In one corner was gathered the group which, in the vernacular of that place, were "having a row." There was a table, with piles of money and packs of dirty cards, which told their own story, and the oil lamps flared on fierce, angry faces.

All of the company carried knives and fire-arms, and were evidently in a dangerous mood. About the disputants some of the loungers had

gathered, with pipes in their mouths, "to enjoy the fun." The stranger's gaze went over at once to this group. He knew the signs only too well — the rage that flamed up in those dark faces, that rose higher and higher in the angry voices, would end soon in something worse; there would be a drunken brawl, and somebody would be hurt — killed, quite likely.

The young overseer usually kept himself out of such scenes. He could not tell now what impelled him to walk over and join the outside circle of lookers-on with their loud guffaws, and coarse tobacco, and whiskey-tainted breaths; but he did it. Meanwhile it was high time to be gone, for the room was fast being cleared of the passengers for the night stage, and he had already lost his pre-empted seat in the corner.

A number of men — miners from the gulches, to judge from their appearance — were engaged in the quarrel; but it had evidently arisen between two, who formed a contrast to the brawny figures about them. The elder was a tall, dark man, with a heavy beard and a certain foppish smartness in his dress. He had a bad face; there was something bold and sinister in it; yet he was a man of the world, and lived by

his wits. The overseer settled that with the first glance. He had found it often necessary to be swift in reading the characters of men since he had been out there among the mines.

The younger man was slender and not above medium height; his face was a good deal disfigured by a long, deep gash on one side, which he had received in a fight or a fall. There were general marks of dissipation about him. He wore an old, slouched cap, and his clothes were soiled and seedy, and his hair and beard, of a chestnut shade, were sadly neglected. Yet, despite all these disfigurements, there was some glimmering of grace in the manner, or it might be in the looks, of the young man, which made the overseer feel instinctively that he had been at some time of his life a gentleman.

He was in a towering rage; he had evidently been drinking deeply, and was insisting that his opponent had cheated him infamously at poker. He had caught more or less of the miners' slang, but there was something in his speech and his tones which at once indicated a higher culture than those around him possessed.

Despite the excitement — partly rage, partly intoxication — under which the speaker told his

story, it was evident that he believed he was telling the truth, and that he felt he had been outrageously cheated by his antagonist. No need to repeat what he said. I would not have brought you into this atmosphere at all, if I could have helped it; and we will get away from it as soon as possible.

There was a sense of rude justice at the core of these men, which made itself felt through all the fumes of tobacco and whiskey. A low murmur of sympathy ran around the circle, amid which one rough miner took his clay pipe out of his mouth, and swore he'd see Coventry had fair play; and another, a backwoodsman, with over six feet of loose joints and raw bones, red-shirted and leathern-breeched, set his half-drained glass of grog on a stool, and swore, "that was an old dodge of the devil's and Denton's; he knew him!"

"What did you call that young man?" inquired the overseer, turning sharply to the miner with the clay pipe; and he asked the question as though it was a matter of life and death to him.

"Coventry — a young, gingerly brought-up chap, from the east. Pity he ever left it.

'Tisn't the place for such high-strung fellows; grog and gambling getting him down to the foot of the hill double-quick."

"O, my God! my God!" cried the overseer, not loudly, but there was an awful pain in his words.

Probably the older gambler felt by this time that the popular sentiment was setting strongly against him. He was cool and collected enough himself, and he saw that he must bring matters to a crisis. Let those fierce natures once plunge into a fight, and it would no longer be a question of right and wrong, but one simply of muscle and luck.

He turned suddenly and dealt his young antagonist a blow that made the latter reel and stagger like a drunken man.

"You call me a liar and a villain — do you? That's the only answer Jack Denton has for such words," he growled, savagely.

There was a cry on all sides. Denton had his partisans among the miners. Fists were doubled and knives drawn.

"We're in for a fight now," shouted the huge backwoodsman with dangerous-looking eyes, as he hastily gulped his glass.

As the young man, who had been half stunned by the cruel blow, recovered from its effects, he whipped out a revolver from his pocket. It was all done in a moment. Denton had not suspected his antagonist was armed. Drink and pain had turned the latter for the time into a madman. You saw the fierce glitter of rage in his eye; he was bent on wiping out that insult with the blood of his foe. There was no time for any movement on the part of Denton or the crowd about him; the hand which held the pistol was swift as lightning; it had taken steady aim; it would have gone off the next moment, when a hand from behind suddenly reached out and struck up the weapon with one strong blow, and the pistol lay at the owner's feet.

The surging crowd actually stood still as one man at the audacity of that act. In that breathless instant the young man had picked up his weapon and turned to confront the new offender.

It was the overseer, who had come in, less than three minutes ago, and who was a stranger to every soul in the room, who had struck up the pistol. There was a deadly gleam in the owner's eyes; he took deliberate aim at the

overseer; there was no possibility of escape for the latter, even if he had sought it. He must have known that he was in the power of a madman, and that his life was not worth a dollar's purchase.

But he stood there quite calm, with his arms folded across his chest. He was white to the roots of his hair; yet there was something really grand in his courage, as he steadily looked the death awaiting him in the face.

"You intend to blow my brains out, I see," he said, not a quiver in his voice; and in all that rude crowd you might have heard the ticking of a clock.

"Precisely! When a man comes across my path as you have done, he must take the consequences."

The voice had a cool, deadly resolution, more trying to the nerves than any exhibition of rage. No doubt that the speaker meant precisely what he said. He had one of those organizations on which vile whiskey acted with sudden, deadly effect. The overseer understood all that.

"Yet you are a gentleman, I think, and will take a last message for me where I shall send it?"

The pistol was still aimed at the overseer; yet this singular request did seem to strike the would-be murderer through all the white heat of his rage.

"Well, gentleman or not, I shall keep my word, both in the killing and the telling. What is your message?"

"I want you, Rox Coventry, to tell your cousin Edith Folger, of Agawam, that Keefe Bartlett sent her his love and thanks with his last breath, and said that when he met her in the next world he would tell her what she had done for him in this; and even there she would be glad to know it."

This time the pistol dropped perceptibly. Through the glare of rage a dull amazement seemed to strike slowly.

"Edith Folger — what do you know of her?" staring at the overseer as though he were a risen ghost.

"Enough to be certain that when she learns the work you have done this night, it will do for her, what she told you it would, the last time you saw her, as you sat in the moonlight on the piazza at Bayberry Hills — break her heart!"

This time the shaft struck home. Through all the frenzy of brain and heart the words had

pierced. That night, five years ago, rose up with its saintly watching moon overhead, and the soft gurgle of winds that lost themselves among the leaves, and the silver light that made the earth divine, and Edith Folger sitting in her young bloom and loveliness by his side.

The pistol dropped slowly.

"Edith Folger! Little Edith!" cried Rox Coventry, in a tone whose awful anguish those who heard long remembered; and then — the revulsion had been too great for the strained heart and brain, and Rox Coventry sank in a fit upon the floor.

The overseer knelt down by his side, and brushed away the long, beautiful hair from the disfigured face; then he looked up to the crowd of men who stood gaping around, more or less impressed by the scene which had just passed; even that hard, cool villain Denton looking curious and amazed.

This time the fight was over.

"Let me take charge of him," said the overseer, addressing the crowd about him.

Nobody objected. The stage had started off some minutes before. Keefe Bartlett took up the limp, unconscious figure, and carried it out

tenderly into a room back of the bar, where it was quiet, and a wood fire was dying out on the hearth, and glowing in a soft, fitful light upon the walls. Keefe laid his burden tenderly on an old lounge; then he stood still and looked, and as he looked, he thought of Rox as he had watched him that day going up the railroad — the lithe, slender figure, so alert with life, and strength, and pride; and seeing him lying there now, helpless, disfigured, ruined in body and soul, an awful sorrow worked in Keefe's face.

"O God!" he cried, in a great burst of grief; "to think what he was — to see him lying there like this!"

And then, utterly overcome, he sank on his knees; and there in that ranche out on the lonely plains, with the loud voices and hoarse guffaws of the bar-room coming through the thin partition, Keefe Bartlett gathered the head of Rox Coventry on his knee, tenderly as his dead mother could have done, and sobbed over it like a child.

CHAPTER VIII.

THREE days had passed since the fight in the bar-room of Bear Ranche. All this time Rox Coventry had lain unconscious on the big lounge where Keefe Bartlett had deposited him. The former had tended his charge with an untiring zeal and devotion, which excited the inmates' curiosity and amazement.

One might almost have fancied the overseer's strong, stalwart life was bound up in that of the pallid, wrecked youth who lay there on the lounge, which pillows and blankets had converted into a tolerably easy couch even for a sick man, Keefe having levied heavily on the bedding supplies of the ranche.

For the most part Rox lay in a kind of stupor, the life that hardship and excess had so strained and dissipated either slowly ebbing out, or the hidden springs renewing themselves at their sources. Nobody could tell which; nobody had

any especial care, except Keefe Bartlett, and he would sit for hours, watching with hungry, sorrowful eyes the white, wasted face, which grew more and more into the likeness of Rox Coventry, as the disfigurement subsided, and sickness chiselled the features.

He was not always an easy patient, either. There were times when a dreadful madness of fever and delirium would leap suddenly to his brain, and he would spring to his feet with glaring eyeballs and frenzied yells. It took all Keefe's strength, physical and moral, to master him at such times.

One and another of the inmates at Bear Rancho used to come in and stare at the sick man, generally shaking their heads before they went out with a significant, "You won't pull him through," or, "He's done for, this time;" and the white, wasted face, with the soul coming slowly back to it, added its own silent, pathetic testimony to these gratuitous verdicts.

One day, just at twilight, Rox opened his eyes suddenly, with the fierce gleam and the glassy dulness gone out of them, and they shone strangely out of their great black hollows. He had been lying so still for several hours, with

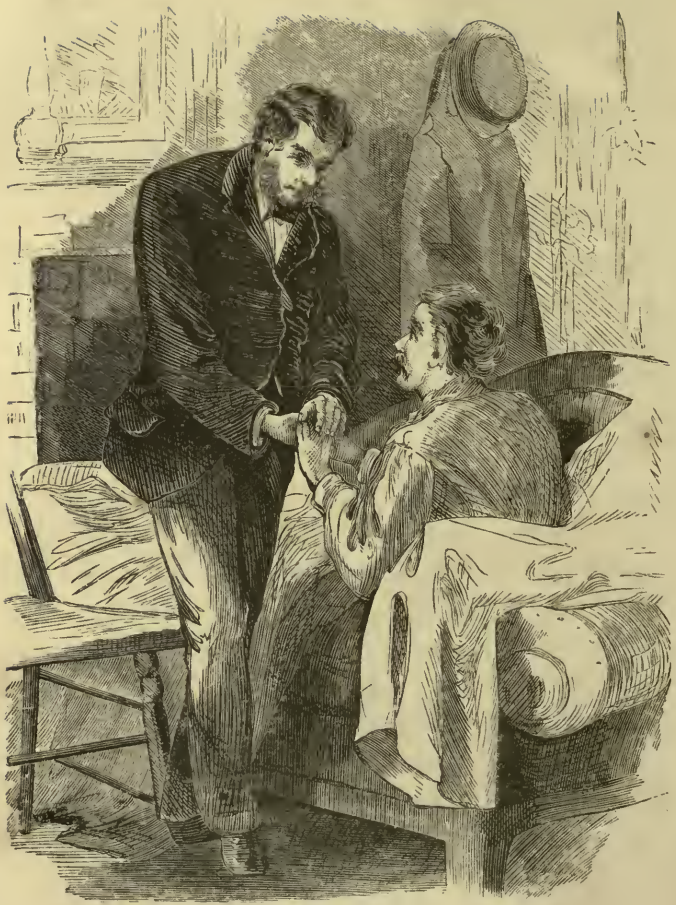
such a gray pallor on his sharpened face, too, that a terrible fear had smitten Keefe's heart, and he had leaned his ear down softly to the other's lips, out of which a thin flicker of breath always came to testify that Rox Coventry was not yet with the dead.

He looked about him now in a vague, perplexed way at first, as though he wondered how he came there. He saw the tawdry yellow and blue paper-hangings, the crimsons of the sunset shining in at the small window panes, the huge log in a splendid blaze on the hearth, and, best of all, that stout, well-knit figure sitting near it, reading the paper.

Keefe did not speak. He knew, all the time, by some subtile magnetism, that Rox's eyes were on him; knew the very moment they opened, and knew, also, that thought and memory were slowly clearing up out of fog and darkness. But they must take their own time, and that was a long, long one. The sunset had paled, and the wind was beginning to muster for its old riot on the plains, when there came a ghost-like flutter of a sound to Keefe's sharpened ears.

"I want to look at you."

Keefe rose up, and went and stood by the



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lounge, with his large, well-shaped figure, that had wholly sloughed off the shambling awkwardness of its boyhood, strong and broad-breasted, with his fine, manly face — a face to be trusted anywhere.

"Well, here I am," he said; and his cheerful, hearty voice rung with the true metal of the soul behind; "a hundred and fifty pounds of good, solid bone and muscle at your service, sir."

Rox gazed with his great, sad, hollow eyes at the stranger.

"Who are you?" he asked again, in that feeble, muffled voice of his.

"For the last two years overseer of the Red Mountain Gold Mines, and thus far on my way to the east."

"Your name?"

He had to be chary of his words yet.

"It won't mean anything to you, but it's Keefe Bartlett."

The invalid pondered that a few minutes, but evidently could make nothing of it. He shook his head in a weary way at last. Then he looked up suddenly, and asked, —

"Are you the man I meant to shoot the other night?"

"Yes."

"How long have I been lying here?"

"Three days."

"And you have been taking care of me?"

"Yes."

"What did you do it for?"

"Because you once did a great favor to somebody I happened to know. But never mind; we won't talk about that now. You are out of the woods. You're close to the turnpike, as we miners say."

"I shall get well, you think?"

"Sound, and hearty, and jolly in a little while."

Rox Coventry gave a little, sharp groan. There was a dreadful misery in his eyes, as he turned his head wearily away. All his life for the past two or three years rose up before him, a hateful spectre, which he feared and loathed, and yet which he felt must follow and hunt him through all the days to come, through eternities, it might be. He could not wipe those years sweet and clean. They must stand there forever with their folly, and waste, and wickedness.

The overseer guessed at once what was passing

in the sick man's mind. He knew that if Rox ever woke up and came to himself again, he could only pass out from the life he had been leading of late into a finer, purer atmosphere through the dark valley of a terrible remorse, self-loathing, and despair. Nobody could help him there. That wine-press must be trodden alone.

But Keefe did what he could. He insisted on Rox's taking some nourishment, and he talked to him with that cheerful, magnetic voice of his, and he ministered to all the invalid's wants with those large, helpful hands, soft in their touch as though they had been a woman's.

Rox was still too weak to demur at anything. He had done a good many kindly deeds to one and another in the days of his indolent, good-natured prosperity, scattering abroad, in a thoughtless way, a good deal as some happy May breeze scatters her blossoms broadcast on the dumb, waiting earth. Doubtless he had helped some friend or relative of this man's over a rough place; but what kind of nature was that which repaid its gratitude with such largess?

Rox asked this question to himself a good many times during the next day and night; but his thoughts groped and fumbled about in a con-

fused sort of mist, and were always losing their way, and getting into the thick dark.

Even that tragic scene in the bar-room only shone out upon his memory in vivid glimpses and flashes, and then shut down into the cloud again.

It seemed to him sometimes that the overseer had mentioned Edith Folger's name; but when he tried to recall when, the whole thing eluded him, and he was too weak still to think steadily or intently.

So a day and a night went by. All this time Keefe Bartlett had watched the invalid with a tender, thoughtful patience, ministering to all his wants, seeing that he had food and drink, and warmth and air, and every possible comfort which that lonely ranche away out there on the edge of the sand barrens could command. The tenderest, most delicate love could have done no more.

Rox took it all quietly enough, too; the old grace of speech and manner shining through all the feebleness and general wreck of soul and body. The grace was a habit, or rather an instinct, with him. He never forgot to thank the overseer for the slightest attention, and once or

twice he had a small joke — a pale flicker of his old, careless mirth — over the trouble he was making. No tears could have held so much pathos.

But the conversation all this time hardly got beyond monosyllables, and was confined to some present need or feeling of the sick man's.

But Keefe was waiting. He knew that the talk must come; and the time for it, too, came sooner than he expected.

It was late in the evening now. Rox had been falling into little dreamy, restful dozes for hours. Keefe had been out to see the stars away up in the blue spaces of the sky, and to drink a few breaths of the cold, crisp air, while the night winds sobbed and trembled, and then, taking heart, gathered together, and made a final rush over the wide, dreary horizon.

Keefe had been gone only a few minutes. When he returned, he found Rox's face turned over on the pillow, with wide-open eyes.

The sick man looked at the stranger, who had been showing more than a brother's care for him all these days, with a curious wonder, which was a healthful sign.

Since their last talk, Rox had seemed too feeble

to take any vivid interest in anything about him.

The words did not come first, — only a groan; not loud, but there was a throb in it of self-loathing and despair.

Rox Coventry had sinned against his better self. Wronged, insulted, outraged, it rose up now out of the dark years where he had trampled and wasted it, and stood before him with its stern, silent, reproachful face. No wonder it wrung that groan out of the depths of him.

Keefe knew what his work was then. It must go deeper than the wasted body he had been tending so carefully all these days, and reach the springs of life which were in Rox Coventry's soul.

He came to the side of the lounge now.

"What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, thank you. You've done too much already."

"Don't say that, I beg of you."

"It's the truth, though; and a man who has been doing all these days what you have for me would be likely to want the truth. You've saved my life, I fear!"

Then the two men looked at each other, — Rox

with that dreadful, hopeless anguish in his eyes; Keefe with a kind of bright, helpful courage, which made his face that moment — the strong, homely, bronzed face — a little like the angels.

"I've meant to," he said, in a half triumphant, half reverent voice, "and I've had a kind of feeling all through that God meant I should, too."

Rox shook his head slowly as it lay there upon the pillow. "It's a wasted, spoiled life," he said. "These last three years have ruined it. It would have been better to let it go, my friend." His voice — the dry, hard, hopeless voice — quivered with a sudden softness over those last words.

"No. God and I know better than that. Your life is saved to courage, and help, and manliness, and honor, Rox Coventry, as you once saved another's."

He did not even then inquire whose. There still stood before him, like a visible presence, mute, and white, and passionless, with the awful reproach in its face, that wronged, wasted, sinning youth of his.

"You don't know what my life has been," he said, "for the last three years — down in all sorts

of slums. I haven't eourage to face it now. I don't want to take it up again. It will only be the old story over. What good is it? What good have I ever done?"

These dreadful remorses were the natural reaction of the bright, elastie, finely-strung organization. Rox had sinned against great light, and Nature took a revenge whieh she would not on a eoarser-fibred soul and body.

"You ask me what good you have ever done —*me!*" said the overseer. His voiee was low, and yet it seemed as though his feeling went all through the words, and burned into them almost like a live flame.

They penetrated even the blaekness of Rox Coventry's mood that night. He did turn now, and look at the speaker with a kind of wondering sympathy.

"Was it some woman, — mother, sister, or love?" he asked.

"O, no, it was a man!" and the oddness of the question made Keefe Bartlett smile a little, even then.

"Was he your brother?"

"No, but somebody dear to me as — my own soul."

Then the words came — the words for which the other had been waiting so long. "Tell me!"

The rushes of wind grew louder outside, like ragged volleys of musketry. Drifts of clouds swayed over, and then dropped away from the sweet, solemn faces of the stars, shining pure and calm up there in the heavens, with something to say to the soul of Rox Coventry, if he would only turn and look at them.

But he did not now. The overseer had set the kerosene lamp in the shade, and brought the solitary wooden chair in the room close to the low lounge, and had commenced telling his story.

You knew it long ago; and yet, if I could only have told it at the beginning as Keefe Bartlett did that night, in that bare, low-ceiled back room of the ranche, — told it with the vivid life and the simple, homely pathos of his words, — it would be quite another story to you. He touched on that hard, bitter, grinding childhood just enough to make it a background for what came after; then he pictured the young factory hand, in his fierce, homeless desolation and despair; and as Keefe talked, it all came back upon his soul, vivid and real as yesterday; and

once more he stood in the corner by the office, drinking in with sullen, envious greed the talk which transpired that morning between the Agawam Mills proprietor and his nephew. There was a swift thrill, much like an electric shock, all through the figure on the lounge, and the sharpened face there suddenly brightened into eager, wondering curiosity. You know the very point at which Rox's memory cleared, and took up the thread of a story in which he was the principal actor.

He hung breathless upon every word after that. He followed Keefe to the corner by the hedge, where the latter had that strange interview with Edith Folger; and the half grave, half gay talk with which Rox could have supplemented all that came up now. He sat at the small lunch-table in the alcove, with the soft, pale sunniness coming in at the windows, and little, happy flickers of wind among the honeysuckles, and Edith's sweet face just opposite him. It seemed to Rox like a glimpse into Paradise after the door has been shut.

But Keefe kept on talking, and Rox soon forgot everything else, holding his breath back not to lose a syllable. He went down that lonely

track again, on his way to Plum Point Station, and he knew now that Death was following close behind him in the dark-faced, lumpish figure of the factory hand!

The overseer's face grew white as he talked. There was a husky tremble in his voice sometimes, and once or twice he paused, and pushed back his hair with a swift, agitated motion; but the story kept on for all that, not leaving out a sentence which had passed that noon between the two as they stood in the tunnel-shaped hollow of the hills, until the whole ended, at last, with the factory boy lying alone on the ground, the twenty-five dollars spread out in his palm, and the hum of the bees in the grasses, and the soft, gray-bellied clouds overhead, and Rox rushing gayly down the track, in his youth and pride, not knowing what Shadow had passed close to him!

Everything had been slowly coming out strong and clear in Rox's memory, as some painting, touched by the dawn, grows slowly out of the dark, until the whole is fresh and perfect.

Young Coventry saw, as he had seen it that day, the large, lumbering figure of the young workman. It was not singular that he discerned

no hint of this in the broad-chested, well-built overseer. It had taken years and manhood to set free what grace and elasticity lurked in the boy's heavy, overgrown figure.

When he paused at last, Rox knew all, even to the throwing the pistol into the river. The speaker was not conscious of it, but quivering in the thick mustache were drops which had fallen from his eyes while he talked.

Rox put his thin hands over his face. You could see the warm rain of tears through his fingers. The talk had gone where the overseer meant it should — to the hurt and despair in the young man's soul.

"I did not suppose that in all this wasted, ruined life of mine I had ever done so much good. I thought I had lived in vain, — utterly in vain," he murmured under his breath.

"In vain!" echoed the deep, shaken voice of the overseer. "When you saved that boy from murder; saved him to courage, and honor, and manhood; to all that he is now, or ever will be! and you tell me, Rox Coventry, that your life has been in vain?"

Rox took away his hands from his face, — that handsome, wasted face of his, — and the despair

which had dulled and sharpened it a little while ago was partly gone.

He looked at the overseer with some grateful wonder in his eyes. "And you have been doing all this for me," he said, "because of what I did that day! How you must have loved him!"

"I loved him," said the overseer softly; but I think you might have heard his voice a long way, "as I told you, — like my own soul!"

"I wish I could see that man — your friend — once," said Rox, in a kind of sad, wearied voice. "If I could just take his hand, and look into his eyes, and he could tell me what you have done, — I am not sure, — but it almost seems that would give me courage to take up my life again, and see what I could do with it."

Then the overseer stood up. He leaned over the low lounge. There was a great joy in his eyes. It grew and grew until it gathered the whole face up into its light. "Rox Coventry," he said, — and his voice had some new, clear ring in it, as though the gladness in his eyes had somehow got down into his tones, — "*I* am the very boy who waited to rob — if need were, to murder — you that day on the railroad; the

boy who owes to you all that he is this hour! Will you shake hands with me?"

Rox actually sprang up in bed as though a shot had struck him. He stared at the overseer with his burning eyes set in their great black hollows. Whether any of the old likeness of Keefe Bartlett, as he stood that day on the track, entered ghost-like into Keefe's face, I cannot tell; but it never entered Rox's thought to doubt one word of all which the overseer had spoken; not one.

He tried to speak. He placed both his hands in the warm, brown ones of his friend, and then —there were no words—the two men cried together.

There was no sleep for either of them that night. Keefe's story had not ended yet. There was the rescue of Bessie Staines from the old well, where she hung between the quiet sky, that watched above, and the cold, quiet water, that waited beneath; and when the two years had slipped between, there was the wonderful night at Bayberry Hills, with Rox and Edith on the veranda, just as he had seen her last; "just as he could never see her again," Rox had often told himself, when the sweet face of his

cousin came up before him like a sorrowful, accusing angel, and the silver glory of the moonlight was always around her, as it had been that night at Bayberry Hills. "Poor little Edith," Rox murmured to himself a good many times that night, in his mournful, weak voice. It was more than a year now since he had heard from her. She had written the last letter, to which he had never replied. How that must have hurt her!

And now Keefe's story went off to Creek Farm, and told about his first visit there, and the little girl who stood in the back yard feeding her colt, and how the grand old farmer had found him watching behind the barberry clumps, and how Bessie had come to meet him, and the joyful welcome that followed, and the happy summer home at Creek Farm,—the happiest of his life,—with the great, warm-souled man, and the little girl with the wonderful purplish eyes, and the sad, mother-faced woman.

And then there was, to crown all, the night when the storm came, and set Edith Folger under the roof-tree of Creek Farm, and the story she told there to Keefe Bartlett; and Rox, listening in wondering amazement, forgot to say any more,

"Poor little Edith!" but all the time the words ran in his heart.

It was very late when Keefe stopped talking, and the wind had gone down outside, and all the loud, coarse laughter, the clicking of glasses, the heavy clatter of boots, which, coming from the next room, had mingled with Keefe's talk, was still now. The passengers had mostly disappeared in the night stages, and the few who remained had dropped asleep on the floor and benches.

Keefe Bartlett rose up, and stood once more by the lounge. "Perhaps I've done wrong to tell you all this to-night," he said, seeing the tired, white face on the pillows.

Rox took the large, brown hand in both his slender ones. "My friend," he said, "how shall I thank you?"

"How what? Do I not stand here the soul that under God you saved?"

Rox looked up then. There was a sudden light in his eyes, which made him look for the first time like old Rox Coventry.

"And now, because of what I owe you, I am going to save you, Rox Coventry! You must let me do it!"

The strong, clear, hopeful voice! It would have put courage into any soul, it seemed.

Rox looked up doubtfully. He remembered all the wrong, and weakness, and sin, the slums in which, during these past years, he had mired and trailed his soul. The worst of it all was, the fibre of his will seemed eaten away, his moral energies broken. "I've no faith in myself," said Rox, drearily. "I don't believe I'm worth saving."

"I'm to be the judge of that," answered the hearty, helpful voice. "*I*, and beyond that, *God!*"

Rox looked once more at the broad, stalwart figure; at the fine, honest face. A sudden hope swelled in his soul and lit up his eyes. He placed his hands in the overseer's. "If you will help me, my friend, I will try!"

And as he said those words, the dawn sent its first cold, gray flicker through the small window-panes into the back room of Bear Ranche.

There was some hard work for Rox Coventry and Keefe Bartlett after this. His own nature, against which he had sinned so deeply, took an

awful revenge on the young man. It could not be otherwise. He had sinned against so much light, and now his glooms and remorses were terrible. I do not want to make Rox Coventry's fall any worse than it had been. He had constantly been surrounded by men far more depraved than himself, and in his deepest lapses he had never quite let go those old instincts of honor and manhood which had shaped the ideal of Rox Coventry's youth.

There was no soul of man or woman who could rise up against him in awful witness that he had spoiled it. But after all, when you remember what Rox Coventry had been, and brought the two likenesses together, it was only to say, with Hamlet, —

"Look here upon this picture, and on this!"

For Rox had clear vision. He had discerned the beauty and majesty of goodness; therefore his sin had been the greater.

Thrown totally upon himself, surrounded by the coarse, demoralizing influences of a frontier life, he had slowly taken on the complexion of things about him. His indolent, good-natured,

absorbent temperament had not resisted the poison of low associations.

It was no apology for him that only a well-poised, lofty-tempered character could have done this.

I will do Rox Coventry the credit to say that, in his weakest hours, he never condescended to wrap his sins in any such flimsy garments of excuse.

He had found the gravitation downward very easy. Drinking and gambling did not seem very bad, after all, where they were the social habit, and at last the tone, the talk, the very atmospheres of men whom his soul had loathed at the beginning, became tolerable or agreeable to Rox Coventry.

Then bad tidings came from the east — ruinous financial speculations, and wreck of most of his fortune.

"The gods mean to desert me!" muttered Rox Coventry; and that prophecy is very likely to work out its own fulfilment.

Keefe Bartlett found that, during the next week, he had to do some of the hardest work of his life; and that was, infusing moral tone, hope, courage, into a human soul.

Lifted up for a time into the warmth and light

of some higher mood, Rox, with his shaken nerves and impressible temperament, was always sinking down into some dark, cold gulf of self-accusation and despair. It was right here that Keefe's broad, helpful strength came to the rescue. He argued, entreated, sustained. There was, about all that he said and did, the power of one who had wrestled with evil, and in the end had not been vanquished.

This was really the secret of the former factory hand's influence over Rox; Keefe Bartlett was himself a better argument than any he could offer, as character is always mightier than words.

From time to time he gave Rox glimpses into the misery of his boyhood; into the struggle and the hard grind of poverty. Rox remembered his own gay, pampered youth with unutterable stabs of self-reproach.

In his weakness of soul and body, he clung to Keefe as one exhausted in deep water clings to the strong swimmer; and the overseer proved himself equal to the burden, although Rox's passions of remorse and despair wrung his friend's breast with an aching pity.

But that friend was strong, helpful, masterful. And then to think of their relative posi-

tions a few years ago; think out of what place and circumstance Keefe Bartlett had lifted himself! There was something morally sublime in that fact, before which Rox's soul stood awed and ashamed. How in the face of that great fact could Rox Coventry, even with his weakened forces of body and soul, dare to say still that "the gods were against him"?

One night, a week after Rox had learned his friend's story, the two young men sat together in the small back room at Bear Ranche. The stage would be along in a little while, and the two were to take it.

Rox, pale and emaciated enough, seemed little able to endure the fatigue of a stage journey; but his hungry eagerness to be off had at last induced his friend to consent to his going. At immense pains, the latter had secured fur skins and warm robes, in which the slender youth was to be buried during the long night ride. Outside it was very clear. Little, tender sobs of wind seemed to haunt the air, and overhead there were countless stars, and among them a small, thin, golden blade of new moon.

Rox was speaking. There was some freshening

in his tones that made them seem like the echo of Rox Coventry's. Of late they had sounded as though they came out of a grave, in their dead-hopefulness. "What a kind, strong, helpful patience you have shown to me all this time! What a debt I shall owe you, Keefe Bartlett, if I ever do come back to any life worth the living!"

Keefe rose and stood, broad, and strong, and stalwart, before the other. "You seem to forget that what stands in these boots owes you anything; that whatever service I may render you, I must be immeasurably in your debt, Rox Coventry!"

"As though you haven't paid that a thousand times over!"

"Can a man pay for his soul?" asked Keefe solemnly, but with a great light in the eyes he benton Rox.

"Well, whatever good there was in it, I don't deserve half the credit. If it had not been for Edith's talk that morning — what a brute I've been to her! — the thing never would have entered into my mind. You owe the thanks to her, not to me, Keefe Bartlett."

"And I owe some other thanks, too," said Keefe, half speaking to himself, in a low, tender

tone. "There was that little girl I pulled out of the well. I see her now, with her small, peaked face, and the great, velvety eyes, that seemed the most of it, as they looked up and searched me before she said, 'O, I know you are a good man; nobody in the world could make me believe you were anything but that!' I hear the clear, fresh, childish voice, slipping along the words, now. I heard them so often afterwards in the dark and strain. They helped me up and out into the light. I might have gone back, even after what you had done, Coventry, if it had not been for that child's words — for her faith in me."

The tears came into Rox's great, sad eyes. "You grand old fellow!" he said. "What a fight you have had, and how nobly you have won!" Then he added in a moment, "Only girls! only girls! but what do we owe them!"

"It comes back again, after all, to that old saying of uncle Richard's. There never was a true or noble deed in the world without some woman or girl was at the bottom of it. I believe it."

Keefe Bartlett drew himself to his full height; there was a light all over his face; he did look rather grand as he said this.

"So do I," added Rox, with a sudden flash of

his old fire. "And if the miserable wreck which sits here rolled up in your furs and skins, Keefe Bartlett, ever gets to be man enough to go back and face Edith Folger, I shall tell her all this."

"I wonder if I shall ever see Bessie Staines again, and tell *her*," said Keefe to himself, hardly above his breath.

At that moment there was a distant rumble, then a thud of horses' feet, and a clattering, grinding plunge and rush outside.

The stage had come!

CHAPTER IX.

"UNCLE RICHARD!" she said. "Uncle Richard!"

If you had heard the voice, you would have been likely to pause a moment and listen, as one does when the sweetness of robin or thrush breaks suddenly out of some thicket near by. It was such a pleasant voice, with a clear, soft, silvery ring in it, it could bear to raise its key, too, without getting thin or sharp, as voices are apt to when they mount into the high notes. It seemed as though some real brightness of the heart lingered along the dissyllables and shut itself down with that final dental.

If you had turned back, as, hearing that voice, you would be most likely to do, and looked up the lane, out of which the words came, you would have seen the speaker.

She had come up from a little branch-path that led off from the highway, and she was leaning

on the stone-wall which enclosed the great apple-orchard. It was a delicious day on the hither side of October, a warm, golden soul of forenoon glowing deeper and deeper into the hours. The air was full of warm, rich smells. All about the girl were the vast heaps of shade thrown by the wild-cherries — great kingly trees, with a few purplish-black globes, still showing amidst the pale-gold of the thinning leaves. A Virginia creeper flashed its crimson flame across the stone-wall close to where the girl was standing. She had gathered some pansies — deep, bright gold, with a narrow crimping of maroon at the edges — from a bed thick with bloom, a little way off. While she spoke, she quite unconsciously laid the blossoms against the coral of the creeper. The contrasts struck her fine sense of beauty; but, for all that, the eyes gazing down on leaf and blossom had a far absent-mindedness in their depths.

And such eyes as they were! The soul and beauty of that girl's face as she leaned over the stone-wall in the brown, warm air of the October morning! The rest of the face was nothing very remarkable. It had a certain bright piquancy all over its olive-glow. There were red lips with dimples that could flash out prettily among the

smiles, and there was the soft roundness of youth on cheek and chin, and hair with a chestnut gloss over all, but the eyes were still, what they had been in its sallow, peaked childhood, the charm and beauty of Bessie Staines's face. They still made you think of pansies, and damsons, and purplish velvety things, in their dark, bright clearness. She wore a cambric this morning, the white ground barred with pink, and a straw hat with a bit of snow-white plume. Everything was fresh and tasteful about her ; the country-bred girl did not aspire to fine ladies' toilets any more than she took on their airs.

Uncle Richard, in the far corner of the orchard, busy with two or three of the farm-hands in gathering apples for the cider-mill, heard the voice, and came up through the shadows and the fine, fruity scents, and the grass over which the white frosts had crept with a little, saddening chill. These ten years since we saw him have been dealing gently with the man. His hair is a little thinner and grayer, and his step a little heavier, and the great, tender soul of the farmer has been getting more and more into his face. There is something really grand about him

as he takes off his hat and wipes the perspiration from his forehead.

"Well, my child, is it anything this time?" smiling on her with a tender pleasantness.

"Yes, it is something really," snapping off the maroons and crimsons of the vine in a nervous way, and then, looking up, she meets the curious, waiting smile in his eyes. "It is very funny, too, and a boggle withal. I want you to help me."

"Something, and funny, and a boggle. I can't put the three together, child, and make it out."

"And I can't tell you, though I've walked three quarters of a mile, and left Betty under an avalanche of preserving quinces, and cling-stones, and green-gages; it was cruel, I know, but I wanted to hear you say, I'd done right, wholly right." Her voice fell a little with some doubt or shyness in these last words; and there was a little thrill of a blush under the olive of her cheeks — they were not in the least rosy cheeks; they never would be.

Uncle Richard began to have an inkling of what had brought his niece away out here to the apple-orchard in the warm forenoon, right in the heat, too, of a "preserving dispensation." He put his large brown hand over the small, restless

one among the blaze of leaves. "Shall I guess?" he asked, simply.

"O, yes; only you never can."

There was a little amused lifting of his iron-gray eyebrows; and then uncle Richard said in the quietest way, "Has Dr. Fleming been round to inquire after mother's nerves this morning? and after he was through with his professional call, did he ask to have a private interview with the daughter?"

She gave a start; a real rose-glow spread all over her face now; the eyes, with a bright wonder in them, stared in a half-scared way at the man. "Uncle Richard, how did you know?" she faltered.

A shrewd light came all over the large, fine face. "O, I am an old man, and I know the weather-signs, Bessie."

"But you don't think *I* did?" a sudden grave anxiety in her tones.

"O, no," in the tenderest voice. "I know my little girl better than that — better than that."

"And you know I meant to do right always, and never dreamed of this?"

"I *know* it, Bessie."

"But it came so sudden! and it's flurried and

worried me. Mother is so shaken and easily excited now, that I did not dare to go to her with it, and I wanted to tell somebody, and so I had to rush with my secret over to the apple-orchard and — you."

That little monosyllabic ending was touched with such unutterable trust and tenderness, though the fingers still shook nervously, fumbling at the running flames of vine.

She had come to the best and strongest she knew for help in her young doubt and tremulousness; the man saw that, and, what was better still, he saw the kind of help she needed.

"Suppose you tell me," he said. "Or what if we should change positions a moment, and I should tell you?"

There were little wavy breezes of laughter all through her answer. "O, you can't make me believe you can do that, you old necromancer."

"Will you let me try, then?"

"Yes," a little breathlessly.

"I think it must have happened very much in this way. Dr. Fleming made a very proper, gentlemanly, dignified speech about the friendly regard which had deepened into admiration, and at last affection, and ended with some fine ex-

pressions of devotion, and an offer of whatever was included in himself, heart and hand; worldly possessions, of course, thrown in; it was all done in the most faultless manner. Dr. Fleming knows how, and he is a gentleman."

The large, purplish eyes had been growing dark with amazement. The girl broke out now —"Uncle Richard, you take my breath away. How did you know?"

"O, I've seen it coming a good while."

"And not told me — put me upon my guard?" There was just a hint of grieved reproach in her voice.

"It could do no good; only embarrass my little girl, and I could trust her instincts to do right when the time came. Thank God for that."

She drew a long breath, with a little ache or doubt in it.

"Suppose I try again, I succeeded so well at first?"

"Well, you may, uncle Richard."

"I think the little girl I know sitting in the west parlor blushed and fluttered with a good many feelings, hearing all this; but when it was through, and her time had come to speak, I suspect that she looked at Dr. Fleming with her

honest face, and said with a quiver, it may be, in her voice, but for all that with a straightforwardness which left no doubt of her meaning, — said something very much like this: 'You have done me a great honor, Dr. Fleming. I shall never cease to be grateful to you. I never dreamed of it; you must know that, and I am very sorry that I can give you in return only liking and respect; but I do these so thoroughly that I can never allow you to marry a woman who does not give you her whole heart.'"

Not the girl's eyes alone this time, but her whole face, seemed actually to have a scared thrill of amazement. "Uncle Richard," she said, under her breath, "what does it mean? One would think you must have been listening in the china closet."

The older man laughed the round, mellow laugh which could only come out of a soul true and sweet with the seasoning of the years. "On my honor, I wasn't," he said. "I was out here getting my russets ready for the cider-mill."

She did not laugh in turn this time. There was a little doubt or tremble in her voice as she asked, "And you think I did right, uncle Richard?"

The answer came, solemn and prompt, and very tender, "Just right, my darling."

She brightened up quickly at that.

"I was a little afraid," she said. "It always seems to me that a woman is more or less responsible for her offers; but Dr. Fleming is so much older than I, and always seemed so immensely my superior, that I've joked and chatted with him much as I should with you. Anything like a flirtation is just horrible to me." A little fiery gesture of scorn supplemented the words.

"He will never think *you* meant that — be at ease there, Bessie."

At the calm, reassuring words, a mist of tears flashed visible across her eyes. "O, it does me good to hear you say that. I have been thinking it might seem to him I was to blame for what had happened."

"Set your sensitive little soul at peace there."

"It seems as though it must all be a dream; a great deal more than the one I had last night. To think Dr. Fleming, with his position, and his culture, and his handsome middle-age, should have taken a fancy to just little me! Why, think of the brilliant, accomplished women who would be proud to marry him! I don't deny I am very

much flattered, but I am honestly a great deal more astounded, uncle Richard."

"I see you are. Suppose we settle it all with the old adage that 'there is no accounting for men's tastes.' I will not express my private opinion about the doctor's."

There were some more little breezes of laughter waving about the air, and she pulled his gray beard with a sudden playfulness. Seeing that, you would hardly have wondered at the doctor's tastes, although her pretty playfulness formed a very small part of the real attractions of Bessie Staines.

Her uncle leaned with a sudden impulse over the wall, drew the girl to his heart, and kissed her cheeks.

"She wasn't ready to leave her old uncle — was she?" he said; and if you had heard the words, you would have had some new sense of what that girl was to him.

"No; I don't believe she ever will be, uncle Richard!"

There was no need she should add anything to that. In a moment she spoke again.

"I think my wits were a little dazed by my dream last night, and this morning's experience

quite upset them. Ordinarily I should have behaved better."

"You've no reason to reflect on yourself, my dear. But what was the dream?"

"It is sure to come once in a great while; I fear it will as long as I live. I am a little girl again, and hanging in that old horror on the well curb, and the sky looks down on me just as it did that day, with its calm, pitiless blue, and the water waits below with its bright, deadly gleam, and there I hang; and it is all so dreadfully real; and all of a sudden I hear the swift, loud rush of steps, and a voice is shouting to me to hold on, and I shall be saved; and, looking up, I see that boy's face leaning over the curb. I suppose it was a dreadfully homely one, uncle Richard, but it always looks beautiful to me, as it did that day; and then with a shock of gladness and terror I am sure to wake up precisely at that point. But the dream or the reality — I don't know which — is sure to haunt me for days afterwards.

"I don't like to have it, my child. Try and push the whole behind with pleasanter memories."

"That's precisely what I do. But the dream always brings that Keefe Bartlett — poor fellow!

— up to me with singular vividness. What do you suppose has become of him?"

"I should extremely like to know. I've always had a feeling we should learn some time. There was the making of a man in that youth."

"I have a kind of instinct," — and now the girl's small, rather brown fingers played with less nervous touches with some of the bright vermilion leaves of the creeper, — "that no harm has come to him, and that some time we shall see him. It is singular, though, that he has never written in all this time."

"Yes; and the poor fellow seemed so grateful when he was with us. I've an instinct, as you say, however, that he will come back some time, and justify himself."

"O, uncle," the girl burst out at this point, "I could stay here in this delicious morning and talk with you forever; but there's the preserving."

There was a glint of humor in the gray eyes.

"From proposing to preserving, Bessie! It's a heavy plunge, but I see it's not going to swamp you."

"O, no; you've steadied and strengthened

me. What do girls do who have no uncle Richards?"

"And what do uncle Richard's do who have no Bessies?"

She had gone down the lane a little way, when he called that out to her, gone with the last loving brightness of her smile, turned back to him, with the soft golden air of the October morning all around her. She heard the autumn sounds, the humming hush of insects, the low, clear gurgle of springs about stumps and stones, the tender rustle of falling leaves, and faint breezes, that seemed like the still steps of worshippers. All around her were the glory and splendor of a year, perfected and transfigured. There was a still, unutterable gladness at her heart. She forgot all about her dream, all about the disturbing trouble of the morning.

Richard Staines leaned in his shirt-sleeves on the stone-wall, and gazed after the rapid figure, pink and white bars showing finely against the dark greens of the lane.

The man's eyes were full of ineffable tenderness as he murmured,—

"What a wife the woman would make who takes a proposal like this as that girl has done!"

I have held up this little side-scene to you because I know of no better way to show you what kind of woman had burgeoned out of the tawny, peaked child, whom Keefe Bartlett, twelve years before, had drawn out of the well.

And if, in this half hour by the stone-wall, you have not seen the real, vital woman shining through all light disguises of speech and manner —you never will!

CHAPTER X.

"  PAPA, it only proves the immortal truth of the old song, 'There is no place like home.'"

Her voice fell from its young brightness into the dear old sweetness of the tune.

It was Edith Folger's own voice. If you had heard it when it said its good by to Rox Coventry on the door-stone, you would have recognized the bright, silvery quality still. Twelve years ago! and yet it did not seem possible, looking at that girl as she sat there before the fire-light. If I were going to describe her, I should have to do it in the very words which I used at the beginning. How gently these silent, mighty magicians of years which had been dealing hardly with so many faces, deepening the wrinkles and frosting the hair, had dealt with hers! They had only added a finer charm to the wonderful sweetness of the face, and the big, dusky blue eyes, and the glossy hair

with flickers as though bright live things were lost in it, and the pretty, unsteady flush of the cheek were all here to-night as she turned to her father with a smile.

And then you did see some change. The sweetness had not been lost, only the years had added something to it — something of feeling, tenderness, sadness.

There must have been some griefs or aches in her life, — all lives have those, you know, — but when the pain touches soul and smile as they had touched Edith Folger's, they never do any harm — I mean vital harm.

There she sat in a sky-blue jacket, with a golden vine in bright, heavy embroidery around the edges of sleeves and lapels. She was in the library, a small, cosy room which opened out of the large one where so long ago she and Rox had eaten their lunch before he started for Plum Point Station, not suspecting what was lying in wait for him on the road.

There was a wood-fire on the hearth, with great, brass fire-dogs which had belonged to Edith's grandmother.

There was one wide, beautiful cloud of flame. It swept back-log and fore-stick into its golden

splendor, and rolled up the chimney after the wind in a grand triumph of blaze. It shed a bright glory over the whole room, and seemed to quite put out the pale, silvery gleam of the gas-lights. Opposite Edith sat her father, with his papers; the owner of Agawam Cotton Mills, more prosperous and portly than ever.

The years had not dealt quite so gently with him as they had with his daughter; still they have not been hard on the great man of Agawam.

You would know him at once for the brisk, prosperous manufacturer, who had that pleasant talk with his nephew so long ago on the office doorsteps. His movements are a thought slower now, and his hair has turned quite gray, and he is in his own house, the "urbane, hospitable, jocose" gentleman we first knew.

The two had only returned the day before from a year's tour in Europe. Mr. Folger had gone abroad partly for his health, partly for his daughter's sake. London and Paris, Rome and Venice, the Alps and the Rhine, cathedrals and picture-galleries had engrossed their thought and time during the last year, and yet both felt a supreme, restful satisfaction in sitting, that frosty October

night, in that small, dark, wainscoted library before that glowing wood-fire.

Mr. Folger put down his paper. "There may be just as good places in the world as Agawam," he said, "but I have never found them."

"Nor I, papa, in all our rushings."

He looked at her and smiled with a fond pride. "I'm afraid it will seem a little humdrum, after the first novelty has worn off, to settle down into the old ways and places."

"It's a groundless fear, papa. The dear old ways and places! All that grand Europe across the sea has nothing like them."

He smiled on her again with affectionate pride. "I had a fear, sometimes, they might make my little girl think the contrary."

She understood what he meant. The flush in her cheek was like a school-girl's. Evidently the world had not spoiled her. "Papa," — with a kind of swift annoyance in her voice, — "I did not suppose you could be so absurd. As though anything would ever be to me like you and Agawam!"

"Well, so long as you are in that frame of mind, I shall be absolutely satisfied," laughed the gentleman; and he returned to his paper.

Edith sat a good while very still, watching the swift, golden current of flame. Shadows of thoughts and memories came into her face, and made a tender sadness there.

At last she drew out a long, sighing "O, dear!"

"What is it?" said her father, putting down his paper again.

"Old things come up so, papa!" a kind of plaintiveness in her voice.

"What things?"

"Long ago things. Times and scenes. I've been all around the house and rooms to-day; and in every path, and covert, and corner, the old, happy days started up and haunted me. Poor Rox!"

Her father was always impatient when she mentioned that name. He had been dreadfully disappointed and angry at the way his sister's son had "turned out," and his condemnation of his nephew's course had been so severe, that Edith had, of late years, almost forborne to mention her cousin's name; the sharp blame hurt her so.

Her father moved uneasily in his arm-chair.

She knew what was coming, and hastened to avert it.

"Everything brings him back to me," she said. "It seems as though he had left hints and reminders of himself in every place: there are the stag's antlers above my chamber door, that he placed there on my birthday, and brackets in the corners, and engravings on the walls; and outside it is just the same: shrubs and vines that he planted, and the pretty rockery he made, with that lovely group of Dryads to crown it, and they all seem a part of himself. He was such a grand, generous, noble fellow, until he went out west, and I loved him instead of the brother I never had. Poor Rox!" and the dusky-blue eyes glimmered through tears.

"I can't have any patience with the fellow," said Bryant Folger, in a tone where you could feel the grief struggling with the strong man's disappointment, "when I remember what his opportunities were, and what he has thrown away.

"What right had he, with his gifts and culture, to set off for the frontiers, and sink himself into vagabondage amongst rough miners, hunters, and rascals in general!

"Wrecked his fortune, too, when he might

have staid at home and saved the bulk. I had a plan of taking him into the mills, giving him a grand berth there; but if a man's once bent on going to the devil, you can't stop him."

"But maybe the Lord can!" exclaimed Edith, with some feeling that seemed almost defiance kindling in her face, "and I don't believe *he* has done with Rox. I know that bit of a letter I got more than a year ago, might be only what you called it, a "thin streak of remorse;" but there were some words which had a true ring in them —'I have come to the grief which you said, that last night when we sat in the moonlight,—the night I have never forgotten,—*would break your heart!*

"'Don't let me do that, Edith. I haven't much faith in myself; but if I ever get to be a man again, I shall come back and ask you to forgive me, and then you will know all the share you have had in saving me.'"

She knew the words by heart. She went over them now in a soft, tender undertone, almost as one might last loving words from the dead.

"Such a letter seems, I know, a very frail reed to lean on; but I can't help feeling what he says is true, and I cannot give him up, papa—

the old Rox I was so proud of — that I loved and trusted so."

"Well, child, you needn't. I hope the young rascal will come to his senses yet. There was such good stuff in him, if it had only been well seasoned, before he took that mad fever of playing savage — much good has it done him. But let him go for to-night; and, my dear, I should like to hear you play 'Sweet Home' again, and then it will be bed-time."

She rose up at once, and went to the piano on one side of the library, running her fair fingers over the familiar keys. A sudden sweetness of sounds thrilled the air, and then there was a knock at the door.

Edith half paused and answered, thinking it was one of the servants. The door opened, and the figure of a man stood there; rather slender and young, with a thick, brown beard.

He stood quite still a moment, when his gaze met the girl at the piano. As for her, she stared a moment, and then a swift change came over her; she grew very white.

"Edith!" he said, "Edith!"

Then she knew it was he, and not a ghost in the doorway, staring at her. She sprang to her

feet, her whole face in a radiant, unutterable gladness.

"Rox! O, Rox!" she faltered.

"I have come back, Edith, as I told you I would, if I ever grew to be a man again; but I have no right here until I have heard you say you forgive me."

She did not say it, because she could not; but she put out her arms, and he took her into his and kissed her.

All this time Bryant Folger had stood by the mantel in dumb amazement. The nephew had not seen his uncle, but of a sudden, Edith lifted her head and drew him over to her father. "Papa," she said, — and there rang through her low, clear voice a bright, ineffable gladness, as though an angel was speaking out of some long waiting and doubt that ended in joyful certainty, — "it is the old Rox come back again."

Her father looked a moment at the fine, manly face, at the figure, heavier and broader now, but still carrying itself with the old slender grace of the youth; then he, too, put out his hands, and grasped and wrung his nephew's.

"Rox, my boy," he said, "welcome home again."

What a night they had! sitting up through the whole of it to talk. The silent frosts at work meanwhile outside, and at last, a cold, gray-blue dawn creeping up across the dark before they separated.

The talk went everywhere, except to that black past, which Rox would never hold up to human gaze. That was between himself and God!

The dark gulf lay in his life, with all its awful remorses, and bitter memories, and out of their despair the old Rox Coventry had come, a wiser, tenderer, nobler man than the generous, luxurious, careless youth could ever have made him.

What touched him deepest of all was that there were no reproaches, no hints of anything gone wrong from any side. It was as though he had been absent for a day, and returned at night to the heart of the old home at Agawam.

He had something, however, to say to Edith alone; he could not confide it even to the generous forbearance of his uncle.

He said it next day, as they two sat together in the warm, golden noon by a great bay-window, with the broad, green terraces just below, and the flower-beds beyond, in all the splendid blaze of their autumn bloom.

"Edith, I want to tell you something about it."

She understood. "Don't do it, if it must be a pain, Rox."

"It would be if I kept it to myself. This part belongs to you."

And then he told her about that night at the stage station on the plains. She was a woman now. She knew there were wrong and sin in the world; she could bear to look at them, when need were, with her pure, pitying eyes.

Rox, it is true, did not paint the whole scene which had transpired that evening, four years ago, in the bar-room of Bear Ranche.

But he told his cousin how the wild, rough life, the varied hardships, the companionship of coarse, bad men, above all, the vile drink, had done their evil work on soul and body; how a friend had found him in the midst of low companions, frenzied with rum and rage, and saved Rox, at the very last moment, from committing murder; how, when consciousness and life itself had almost ebbed, this friend staid behind in that lonely ranche, nursing him back to life and hope, with more than a mother's tenderness; how at last they had gone away together; how this friend, strong, uplifting, brave, patient as Rox

had thought none but God could be, had borne with him, revising his previous intention of returning east, in order that he and Rox might remain together; and his example, and love, and helpful courage had shamed, and urged, and at last brought back young Coventry to his old better self, to some manhood stronger and nobler than that, he hoped, to God.

Rox had been with this friend for the most part during the last four years, as book-keeper at first, later as assistant superintendent of the mines.

Edith was greatly moved with the whole story, though she listened quietly, with her hand shading her eyes, and a tremble about her lips.

"If I could only once see and thank that man, — your friend, Rox."

"My friend — yes, Edith, more than that; my preserver, without whom I should not be sitting here to-day."

There was a little solemn, beautiful silence.

"But you forget, Rox, you haven't told me his name."

"Keefe Bartlett — just!"

"Keefe Bartlett!" She repeated it once or

twice. "It seems as though I must have heard it before. I am sure I have!"

He let her ponder for a while, watching her with a curious, pleased look. At last it all cleared up in a flash. There was the fierce gale outside, and the pleasant sitting-room at Creek Farm, with the grand old master, and the sad, kindly-faced mother; and there was Bessie Staines with her wonderful eyes, and the dark-faced silent young stage-driver, who had dragged her out of the well, and Edith herself was sitting in their midst telling the story of Rox's walk to Plum Point Station, and the strange thing that happened on the way.

"Did he remember?" she faltered.

"Yes, Edith, if it had not been for you, Keefe Bartlett would never have known me that night at Bear Ranche station."

This was strictly true. There was more beyond, but that involved another's secret. Perhaps Edith would know some time.

She believed now it was her story, that night, which had awakened this profound interest for her cousin in Keefe Bartlett's soul, ending at last in his long, beautiful service.

"How wonderful it all is!" she murmured.

"And he had had no chances, I remember, of any sort; he was only a stage-driver."

"No matter — he is a real hero; the grandest, noblest fellow in the world!" said Rox, enthusiastically.

But Edith was crying; tears that were more than words in their silent, unutterable, prayerful joy.

At last she looked up with her glad, wet face. "This friend of yours, Rox, — where is he?"

"At Creek Farm — if not now, in a day or two."

"You will take me out there, Rox? It seems the fitting place to thank him."

"Yes."

CHAPTER XI.

THERE it was! Somebody at the front door! Bessie Staines was sorry to hear the loud, sharp, twanging sound of the old brass knocker which had done duty at Creek Farm for half a century. The summons came like a harsh, intrusive voice from that outer world which seemed to have no rights here to-night. She wanted to shut every foreign thing out from the heart of this beautiful home quiet, and warmth, and brooding joy, for this one evening, just. The other claims should have their time and place; but this night seemed to belong solely to themselves; the trio about the wide old hearthstone — uncle Richard, her mother, and herself.

Any new entrance there must be like a jangling discord in the harmony.

Some such thoughts went half consciously through the girl's mind in the instant or two before she rose up after hearing the knocker.

Just at this flash of time I want you should glance inside the room; it is the very one where, long ago, Edith Folger sat in a little heart of peace and shelter, while the great summer-storm raged outside, and told her story to breathless listeners; above all, to that strange, brown, silent youth in one corner.

To-night it is very quiet outside. The late frosts are busily at work. The summer has gone softly away at last, and left them to have their own will with her beauty of grasses, and leaves, and blossoms.

Yet those black, devouring things come as soft and tenderly as her spring sunshine and her summer rains — as softly, uncle Richard says, "as old age does, stealing along with white hairs and deepening wrinkles, so quietly, that one does not feel the fingers until at last he finds the old worn-out body is done with, and the soul is ready and waiting for the larger blessedness." And if you had seen the old man's face when he said this, the words would seem to have quite another meaning from the one they have reading them here.

There was a wood fire on this hearth also; a great birch log supported by maple and chestnut, and all taken up in one wide, surging splen-

dor of flame, that rushed into the great, black-throated chimney.

Mrs. Staines sat on one side of the fire. She has grown pale and worn in these years, but pain and the slow failing of the life-springs have spared the motherliness in her face. She will carry that down to the grave which awaits her, not many years off. She is almost a confirmed invalid now, and the daughter has fairly taken the mother's place as mistress of the household.

There she sits, quite idly, by the globe of the great kerosene lamp. She has been cracking walnuts. A tempting heap lies in an old-fashioned, blue-rimmed, China urn on the small table, and close to them is a glass dish piled with great, beautiful pears, brown, with streaks and dashes of red; the summer's ripe, wine-like juices bottled in those glowing rinds. Uncle Richard, in his green dressing-gown, which becomes his fine gray head, has a wonderfully patriarchal look to-night. He is reading scraps of news from the daily paper, which finds its way up to Creek Farm every night from the distant city.

So the knock comes jarring and intrusive into this homely peace and warmth.

"Perhaps it is somebody in trouble," Bessie thinks, with a little prick of conscience, as she slips off the buff apron and goes to the door.

She wears a dress of some dark crimson wool, with a bit of snowy frilling about the neck; the light from the hanging lamp falls upon her as she opens the front door and looks up at the stranger standing there, with those damson-purple eyes of hers; he has seen them before; he thinks of the time now.

The stranger lifts his cap to the girl, and she flushes under the olive of her cheeks, and decides that he is a gentleman.

"Does Mr. Richard Staines live here?" in a clear, manly kind of voice.

"Yes; will you walk in, sir?" says the girl; and the stranger enters the hall and follows his hostess into the light and warmth of the old sitting-room — a wonderful contrast to the chill and darkness outside, where the frosts are having it all their own way.

Uncle Richard looks up, and then rises as the stranger enters. He sees a broad-shouldered, sturdy, well-built young man, with thick, brownish hair and beard; a pleasant, shrewd, manly face, too. He wonders if he ever saw it before.

Mrs. Staines, too, in her thickly-padded invalid's chair, looks at the stranger with the motherly face he remembers so well. He comes forward; he puts out his hand to uncle Richard, and as he looks at the kingly old farmer, his whole face lights up with a glad, reverential joy.

"Mr. Staines — uncle Richard," says the stranger, in a voice that you rather feel than hear has a shake in it, "won't you find a name for me?"

Uncle Richard settles his glasses and gazes very earnestly at the stranger. The mellow sweetness of the old man's smile comes into his face. "My friend," he says, shaking his gray head, "I'm afraid you will have to help me."

But Bessie has been standing just behind her uncle, where the lamp shines full upon the stranger. She has been gazing with a breathless intentness; suddenly a great light shoots into her eyes, and takes up her whole face, and the words come in a kind of amazed cry — "Keefe Bartlett!"

He turns, his whole face full of a bright gladness, and gives his hands to the girl. Then they all know.

"Welcome back again. We've lost you for all these years," said uncle Richard, as he wrung Keefe's hand; and then it was Mrs. Staines's turn. When it came to her, the young man put his face right down to the thin, withered cheek and kissed it, remembering the time when she had put her arms about his neck in that mother-way. They made him welcome as though it was to his own home he had come that night.

There was so much to tell and to hear! Keefe had written several times, but the overland mails were slow and uncertain, and Keefe's letters had never gained Creek Farm. It was ten years since he had left them, going west to seek his fortunes the very autumn that he gave up stage-driving.

He had at first found employment and gained experience in Chicago before a tempting offer took him out to the mines, where they had all lost sight of him.

But Keefe's face and voice spoke more for him than his own story did that night. He was rather modest and reticent when it came to talking of his own fortunes; he hardly made himself the central figure of scenes and places;

but they knew that it had been well with him in that deep sense in which it can alone be well with any of us.

There was that in his whole air and bearing which told of the brave, masterful soul of the manly heart and mind which had struggled and conquered.

In the course of the talk Keefe touched on Rox Coventry; said that he had met him out west, when he was sunk low in sickness and trouble of various kinds; that he had it in his power to render the young man a good deal of service, for which Coventry had been extravagantly grateful. Business had brought them into close companionship during the last four years, and a deep mutual respect and attachment had been the result. Keefe knew young Coventry for a generous, noble fellow, who had struggled and conquered where the odds were greatly against him. Rox was now at Agawam with his uncle. He knew Keefe was expecting to visit Creek Farm, and it was likely the former might be over the following day.

The hearers were all curious and interested in Rox's fortunes, remembering Edith's story;

but he slipped quite into the background before Keefe Bartlett. Then there, too, was the little girl he had dragged out of the well on that memorable day. It must have been in the thoughts of both to-night, although neither alluded to it.

Yet the young man could hardly believe that this fair flower of womanhood had burgeoned out of the small, peaked, sallow-faced child he had dragged over the well-curb; but the eyes held their purplish radiance still; he had never seen any eyes like those, Keefe thought, in all his wide wanderings.

They were searching his face too, a little shyly, the bronze, striking face, to find some likeness to that of the boy's who had leaned over the well in the child's strait of agony, with help and pity in his looks and words; and the halo which the coarse, heavily-moulded features wore then to the girl's gaze, still lingered around the strong, manly ones which thought and time, and his own soul, had been chiselling for Keefe Bartlett. Yet there was no restraint in the talk of the young man and woman.

It was simple and bright, like the old pleasant

friendship of the youth and the child, and its swift current flowed through grave moods or gay ones far past the hour of midnight, and outside the silent black frosts were at their work, and over all the shining stars of God.

CHAPTER XII.

THE next day, just in the warm, mellow noon-sunniness, Rox Coventry came. He did not come alone. He had brought his cousin with him on the noon-train, which, during the last month, had stopped at the junction, not more than half a mile below Creek Farm.

Edith had not been under the roof since the summer-tempest, years ago, had driven her there. She was always planning to return to Bayberry Hills, but something was sure to break up her rustic little programme, and sweep her off in some gay current of life. But she had come back now, with her heart very full of the old visit, very full of a great deal else too.

She wore some soft, silky fabric, of a tender violet shade, with dark-blue knots at her throat, and a simple native grace shining in every movement. You could not have looked at the girl without loving her, and in a different way one

might say the same of Bessie Staines, who came to meet her new guests in the pretty alpaca with a bright amber glow in all its folds, which she wore in honor of Keefe's arrival.

It is true one of the young women had had every possible advantage which wealth, culture, and travel could bestow, while the farmer's niece had hardly been a hundred miles from home in her life, yet she had a bright, graceful charm of her own, that did not suffer when it was brought face to face with the Agawam proprietor's beautiful, high-bred daughter.

Bessie Staines made you always think of some delicious little waterfall that sings and sparkles in cool, green depths of the forest.

The first greetings were hardly over when Edith turned of a sudden and held out her hand to Keefe Bartlett. Her soul was in her face. It was in that very room, too, where, long before, she had thanked him for what he had done to Bessie Staines.

The gesture now reminded all who witnessed it of that other scene in this very room.

"Ah, my friend," she said, "he has told me all! How shall I thank you?" Her voice broke here,

and there was a flash of tears across the blue of her eyes.

Keefe turned to his friend, with a question and reproach in his looks. Rox made a little, significant, negative sign, which Keefe interpreted, and which the others did not see.

Keefe held the hand which Miss Folger had given him. "I don't deserve any thanks, and therefore if you offer them, they will only make me uncomfortable."

They were very simple words, but some quiet, reserved force of character had been all these years growing more and more into Keefe's speech and whole bearing.

Edith could not comprehend the look of tender, half reverential gratitude which shone on her, but she did perceive that the young man shrank from any allusion to the subject of which her own heart was so full.

Uncle Richard had come in with Keefe to greet his guests, the two men being out-doors surveying the changes on the farm-grounds, at the time of the young people's arrival.

Edith was delighted to see her old friend, and told him he had grown handsomer than ever;

age improved him; which was true enough. It is apt to be of men like Richard Staines.

The visit which followed was as delightful as possible. Even the pale, patient, invalid mother forgot her feebleness as she entered into the bright, magnetic time.

The day had a tender, brooding softness, as though it was doing its best to make up for the loss and ravage of the night's black frosts.

We all know such days; dim, quiet, restful. They have not the wide-spread splendor, the varied glories of color, that have gone before; but what a still, divine peace broods through those warm, golden hours, glowing between the chill, late mornings, and the black selvages of frosty nights!

It was singular how much they all found to talk about, precisely as though they had known each other all their lives, instead of meeting now for the first or second time.

They loitered in doors and out, these four young people with uncle Richard; they feasted on the brown golden pears, and the purple wine of great clusters of late grapes; they flashed up sometimes in the merriest jokes; and the young men, especially Rox, sketched bright, strong,

dramatic pictures of scenes of life out on the frontiers.

He had far finer gifts of expression than his friend, but there was a quiet force, a latent strength in Keefe's very presence, which made itself felt even when he was quite silent.

Edith was immensely struck with the change which the years had wrought in the stage-driver. She would never have known him for the shy, crude, lumbering youth who had driven the Black Hawk Mountain stage, any more than she would the bright, graceful, charming girl for the curious, peaked, sallow, large-eyed child who had hung around her that night of the summer gale.

But the soul of this visit — that which gave it power and significance never to be forgotten by any of these people, was what happened after the supper was over, and they had all gathered in the warm, old keeping-room which was really the heart of the homestead of Creek Farm; and outside the frosts were getting ready for their work again.

Another great chestnut log, and birch boughs around it, waved a splendid oriflamme in the chimney.

Behind them the kerosene burned under its soft ground shade, and they all sat in a crescent between the two lights.

Rox's gaze went from one face to the other. "I'm so unutterably glad we came, Edith!" he said. "It's good to be here."

Bessie's laugh flashed out like sunshine at that speech. "Why, Mr. Coventry, that is precisely what Peter said to the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration," she said.

"So it was, Miss Bessie, but I was not thinking of Peter, only of the present fact."

In a moment Rox's gaze had gone over to his friend who sat just opposite. There was a great seriousness in young Coventry's face, a tender light in his eyes.

"Bartlett," he said, "I want to tell them to-night. We are all friends, and they ought to know."

Keefe moved uneasily. He knew he would be the central figure in Rox's story. "I would rather you did not, Coventry," — a kind of deprecating appeal in his voice.

"But it is my right. I feel as though I *ought* to do this," urged the other; and after that Keefe said no more.

So Rox told the story of that night at Bear Ranche Station to these people of Creek Farm. Its darkest features were fresh, even to Edith Folger; for this time he disguised nothing, threw no veil over the sin and shame, and the vivid horror of the ending. The only thing he left out was the last clause of the message which the overseer had sent to Edith Folger. One saw the young man standing there, calm, brave, unflinching, waiting with folded arms for the murder which Rox, in his madness, was bent on, and afterwards young Coventry told the of the long, tender, helpful patience of his friend, which Rox said had given himself a new sense of God's pity and love, and they learned how Keefe had remained by him, nursing, cheering, strengthening the sick body and soul, and never left him for years, until the work was done, and Rox had regained his lost honor and manhood.

When he paused there were no dry eyes in the crescent between the kerosene and the coals.

It was very hard for Keefe, though. He did not at all relish sitting still and seeing himself held up a hero to everybody's eyes.

He flushed all over his face, not with the bright vividness of a girl, of course, for he was

a strong man, but with a dark redness under his brown skin.

There was a little silence when Rox ceased speaking. His last words had been, "I have made this confession because it seemed a duty I owed to your friend and mine — the best friend a man ever had."

Then Keefe spoke: "So my turn has come for confession, I see! You have driven me to it, Rox."

"I did not mean to. There is no need, Keefe."

"Yes, there is, though. I must make as clean a breast of it as you, or never look you in the face again."

Keefe turned now to the others and said, very earnestly, "I can bear witness, as nobody else can, to the courage and patience with which Rox Coventry fought that hard battle with himself. He had everything to struggle against; hardships, exposure; while all that roughing it on the frontiers, for which his previous life had so unfitted him, had broken his health and shattered his nerves. His strength of body and soul seemed paralyzed; his fancies were diseased; and he who fights his battle against such odds

and wins the victory, is the real hero. Besides — "

Keefe stopped there a moment. Rox alone knew what was coming. The young man turned to Edith; his voice shook a little. "Your cousin, Miss Folger, has not repeated the whole of the message I sent you that evening he and I met at Bear Ranche. There was a last clause like this: 'When I meet her in the next world, I shall tell her what she has done for me in this.' You don't know what that means — do you?"

"No, Mr. Bartlett," faltered Edith, trying to take in the meaning of the words, and utterly bewildered. She had supposed, as they all did, that the story she had told years ago in that very room, was the first knowledge Keefe Bartlett had of Rox Coventry, and that all this had recurred to the overseer when he overheard the name that night, in the bar-room of the western ranche, and that in her story lay the secret of all the beautiful service and friendship that followed.

"Well, I am going to tell you now," said Keefe.

Then he commenced. His short, strong sentences had not the picturesque grace of Rox

Coventry's talk; but through them one saw the lonely, friendless factory boy, as he hung sullen and desperate around the buildings at Agawam in the pale autumn morning, until he wandered off to the office building, where, just behind the corner, he had overheard the conversation, on the doorstep, betwixt the proprietor and his nephew.

It was wonderful how Keefe retained every word, almost every inflection, of that talk. As you listened, you understood the secret of his old dramatic power, and its attraction for the factory hands.

Then he went on to the interview betwixt Edith Folger and the boy she found huddled up in the corner by the hedge that forenoon, and whose rudeness almost frightened her away. Here again he went over the whole dialogue, as though he had learned it by heart from the actors themselves.

He told, too, how the devil had been at work all that day in the young workman's soul; how, in his mad despair, the evil purpose had grown and grown, until he had watched Rox leave the house at Agawam, and dogged his steps, and followed him down the railroad, and — he broke

off right there; "they all knew the rest," he said. "Edith had told it, sitting in that very room, the night of the summer gale, so many years ago."

"But how did *you* know about the other?" she cried out breathlessly.

They had all been listening in a dead silence to the talk; the soft, happy humming of the fire making a low, murmurous sound, like the pleasant rustling of leaves in summer winds.

Keefe turned to the girl now: a great light shone in his deep eyes. "Because, Miss Folger," he said, "the very boy who answered you like such a brute that day, who followed Rox Coventry from your door, and who would have robbed or shot him in the lonely hollow of the railroad, was the man who has told you this story to-night! Do you wonder, now, at anything I did for Rox Coventry, knowing from what he had saved me?"

It was growing towards midnight, and hours since Keefe had finished his story. When the first overwhelming surprise with which his hearers had heard the *dénouement* of his tale had in some degree subsided, there had been a few touches to add to the picture, of the pistol

which Keefe had thrown in the river, of the new, happy, child-like heart which had entered into him, and with which he had gone on his way through the pleasant, peaceful country roads to find Bessie Staines, and rescue her from the old well.

It was long past midnight, and they were all about retiring, Rox and his cousin having come with the intention of remaining at Creek Farm until the next day.

The evening had been one which could never be forgotten, which must lift itself like a great mountain height in the landscape of all their memories.

What they had said, and felt, and done in all these hours, you can imagine, placing yourselves in their case; but if I tried to tell you, it would only be with Hamlet's "Words! words! words!" That would fail, after all, to hold the truth. One little jest only flashed out across the grateful, solemn joy of that evening's mood.

It was just before they separated for the night, that Edith went up to Keefe Bartlett, and with a sudden playfulness shining through the tears which had been in her eyes all the evening, said, "To think you were sitting here, and

quietly listening to that shocking portrait I was drawing of the boy behind the hedge! Won't you forgive me?"

"How can I do that, Miss Folger, when you only drew the portrait faithful to the original?"

And Keefe's pleasant, tender smile beamed full upon the young lady.

"But you have changed so in all these years. I am too conscientious merely to flatter any man, least of all, *you!* But I certainly do not find the faintest hint of likeness to the boy I remember sitting behind the hedge that morning. Are you quite sure, after all, you are he?"

Just then they heard uncle Richard speaking. "I cannot tell; but it seems to me that human souls when they talk with God, must like oftenest to be *alone*. Yet—I am an old man—I have never seen a night like this. It may be I can say something from all your hearts to him."

And uncle Richard did. But what—I could no more write it here than he could say it to the world.

CHAPTER XIII.

IT was a spring day now — such a glory of a day! There had been a long, dreary waiting, — mournful rains, with chill and barrenness everywhere, and little angry squalls of snow flapping out white war-banners away down to the very edge of May.

But at last it had come — the great electrical thrill of the awakening to that wide, dumb, waiting earth. It was as though, in one moment, the soul had entered into it. The whole land glowed with fresh, tender green; the soft, radiant air was full of the spicy sweetness of all sprouting things. Everywhere the leaves were bursting in a great joyous fullness of life. The peach-trees began to run out red lances of blossoms, and the apple-boughs were already creamed over with white.

On such a morning, Bessie Staines went out to the barn to find some fresh eggs, and pat Brownie's

nose. She carried a small willow basket, and she had on a new buff print morning gown, which became her better than a good many costly silks would. She did not even wear a hat; but her hair was shade enough, with its brown silky curves, for the soft wind to play with daintily as a lover might.

She was not thinking of lovers, though; she was thinking of Brownie, to whom she went straightway. The colt was now a magnificent horse, with its beautiful curve of neck, and its shining heap of mane, and its glossy chestnut hue. Bessie could sit her finely. She had a dark-green riding suit, and Brownie and his young mistress might often be seen dashing along the up-hill roads, or over the broad, level meadows. Altogether it was a pretty sight. The people would come to the farm windows to stare after it.

Bessie Staines was very glad in the warmth, and sunniness, and all the fresh broadcast life of the new May.

"We'll have a wonderful ride before the day is over, — you and I, Brownie," she said, stroking the white nose, that still looked as though a fleck of sea-foam was caught there; and the creature neighed a low, joyful assent.

They two, the girl and the horse, were alone that moment, in the long, pleasant, country barn. Everything was bright and still about them. In the next room, beyond the mangers, was the great, warm, broken haymow, where the eggs were; on the brown rafters overhead were flickers of sunshine, like golden wings of birds.

In that moment's hush uncle Richard's gray mare, with a man on her back, rode suddenly into the barn.

Bessie looked up with a little surprised brightness in her face.

"Why, Mr. Bartlett, are you back already?" she said.

"Yes, I've had a brisk five-mile trot on the up-roads. What a magnificent morning it is, Miss Bessie!" springing off his horse.

"Yes; Brownie and I have been promising ourselves a treat before the day is many hours older."

I may as well say here that Keefe Bartlett had now the general eastern management of several prosperous western mining companies. This made it necessary for him to reside in New York; but whenever he could get a breathing-space during the last winter, he had run up to Creek

Farm. This visit was what he called one of these breathing-spaces.

He came now and stood by the girl's side. "What a splendid creature Brownie is!" he said, as he stroked the shining cataract of mane.

"She has no rival in the county, uncle Richard says," the girl answers, "with a look as proud and pleased as though he had paid her a personal compliment," Keefe thinks.

"I remember that night I saw Brownie for the first time, while I was skulking behind the barberry-clumps, and watching you both, as you stood in the front yard. It was a very pretty sight, Miss Bessie;" and Keefe Bartlett's gray eyes smile on the girl.

There is a hint, and no more, of a blush, under the olive skin.

"I think you treated us very unhandsomely to run off as you did after — that day at the well."

Her voice dropped a little on the five monosyllables.

They seldom alluded to that time, now.

"If I had known precisely the kind of people you were, I might have gathered courage to come in that night I turned and left you at the great gate. But how could I know there were such

folks in the world! Besides," his voice falling suddenly, "the thought of what I had come so near being that day must have held me back."

She felt the pain in his voice. "Ah, Mr. Bartlett, as though that could have made any difference with us, with anybody!"

She looked up at him with her great lustrous eyes, full of a kind of indignation of pity as she said these words.

The sight moved him strangely. The man's strong heart swelled and thrilled with a sudden, mighty tenderness for the girl standing there in her youth and fairness.

"I believe you, Miss Bessie," he said, with his eyes upon her. "I believe, if you had known all, it could have made no difference with you, only—" He paused there. "*I* must have felt it, you know. *I* must always feel it."

"It is a shame that you should, Mr. Bartlett. Such a grand, true, noble man as you are!" She stopped right there; a passion of pity had hurried out her adjectives. This time it was no hint of a blush; it was a rosy, glowing one, which spread all over her face.

Keefe Bartlett saw it. Then, for the first time,

he was conscious that he loved this Bessie Staines. She had in a certain way been sacred and apart to him from that hour when he lifted her out of the well, and his feeling had been so natural, so much a part of his life, that he had never questioned it; and now, in a moment, it thrilled into a great yearning and joy, as he looked at the girl and thought of all her charm and brightness, of her warm heart and sparkling wit, and of her simple, beautiful household ways, that she carried graciously as a queen through all the homely, every-day living at Creek Farm.

But a great doubt and fear came behind. They forced the next words out of him, against the strong will which would have held them back. "But if I should ever ask any woman to be my wife, I should first have to tell her all that — I would not ask her until she knew it, as you do, and — it might make a difference."

She spoke again in a glowing passion of generous scorn. "Not if she were a woman worthy of the name — worthy of you."

Then he turned and faced her. "If I were to ask you, would it make no difference, Bessie?"

She gave him one proud, fond glance from

those great, damson-colored eyes, but not a word for answer. He did not need one.

Then, in the sunshiny stillness of the old barn, he drew her to him, and kissed her. "Years ago," he said, "a little girl put up her face to be kissed, standing out there by the farm-yard gate. I think it was that child's kiss which saved me from going down in all the dark and struggles which were to come; only a little girl, but she saved me!"

"O, Keefe!" She was clinging to him and sobbing.

"And this is the first young face I have kissed since that time," drawing his hand tenderly over her cheek's wet brightness.

They went into the house together. Mrs. Staines sat knitting by the window, in the warm May sun. The winter and the long, wet spring had shaken her dreadfully; she looked paler and thinner, and more peaceful than ever.

Uncle Richard sat a little way off, reading some news to his sister-in-law out of last night's paper.

Nothing is changed about him. It is the same fine gray head, the patriarchal face and air, of last autumn.

"Uncle Richard — mother — " falters Bessie; and the two look up, and see her and Keefe standing there, and then they know!

What is there more to tell? The mother's glad tears, the old man's solemn blessing, and the warm, beautiful, May sunniness, like a tender thought of God, over and around them all.

It is May still, though just on the edge of June now. Some time ago, there was a magnificent sunset, and Rox Coventry and Edith Folger were out on the veranda watching it. There is a brown, lustrous twilight in the air, and little breezy sounds of fresh leaves all through the grounds, and overhead stars coming and coming into the blue, until it will be full of them.

Edith puts her head out of the window. "What a delicious night it is!" she says, drinking in the fresh fragrance of sprouting and blossoming things: "we shall have a beautiful day for our trip to dear old Creek Farm to-morrow. It is to be a visit of congratulations, you know."

"Yes," Rox answers, pacing — just as his old habit was — up and down the great, handsome sitting-room; "and it has all turned out so happily. Bessie Staines is just the kind of

wife Keefe ought to have — bright and sweet, with a transparent honesty, and a subtle, tantalizing charm of look or manner — I never could quite make out which; but I had half a mind to fall in love with her myself, only —"

"Only what?"

He came and stood before her with all his old, easy grace of manner.

"There were *you*, Edith!"

She lifted her hands, with the old, arch playfulness. "Was I the ogress who stood in the way?" she asked.

"Yes, you were; and what is worse, that 'own cousin' stands like a grim Fate in the way, and waves me off from proposing to you."

"You ought to be thankful, Rox, it spares you from such a misfortune," says the girl half gayly, half gravely.

"I'm not; but a fellow must make the best of circumstances, and I am thankful enough that no masculine biped, this or the other side of the ocean, swooped up my pet. If he had — you know my old threat — I should certainly have shot him!"

Her laugh broke again merrily. "Well, I shall give you no chance to do that, Rox. To think it is all so nicely settled at last, and that you

are to live with papa and me always, and be just my brother! That has always been so much dearer name to me than lover!"

"I don't deserve all this, Edith."

"Don't say that, Rox. It hurts me."

"I wouldn't do that for the world, Edith; but a fellow must remember sometimes. I'm glad, however, that uncle Bryant knows all you do now. I never could have accepted this generous offer, this fine berth in the mills, if I had not made ample confession beforehand."

"He does not respect or love you the less, Rox, now that he knows all. He said to me yesterday morning, after the matter was finally arranged, 'I have done by Rox, Edith, as I would have done by my own son.' I was glad to hear that."

"Dear Edith! All that son and brother could possibly have been to him and to you, I mean, God helping me, to be to you both."

He said it in a low, solemn voice, as though it was between God and his soul, and he laid his hand softly on her bright hair. They both were silent a few moments.

Then she said, "I never saw papa so touched and moved by anything as he was by — your story,

Rox. He talked it over with me for hours, and the tears were in his eyes more than once. He is very curious to see Keefe Bartlett, too."

"That noble Keefe! His young, manly strength and shrewd sense are just what is needed at Creek Farm, now uncle Richard is getting old, and the mother so feeble. The burdens will drop gradually on his strong shoulders. The household needs him. He has found his place."

"And so another household needs you, and you have found your place, Rox."

He looked at her with a great tenderness shining in his face. "I owe it all to you, Edith, my cousin, my sister."

"Rox!"

"It is true! God's own truth! Your talk that morning put the thought into my mind, roused the generous impulse in my heart. If it had not been for you, I should never have turned back that day on the railroad, and given Keefe Bartlett the money; and you know how pivotal that act of mine has been in the fate of both. Only a girl, Edith, but you saved me!"

You remember it was what Keefe Bartlett had said to Bessie Staines that morning in the barn.

What more can I say, except that a little far, golden rim of new moon came just then over the distant hill-top, and looked at the two sitting there by the window — at Rox Coventry, with the tender shining in his face, and at Edith Folger, with the awed joy in hers; and that it seemed as though that young moon was a smile of God, leaning out upon both of them?

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